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**'AVAILABLE ON VIDEO'
FESTIVAL FILMS**

ISSUE

54

THE COLLECTIVE

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Special thanks to Cinematheque Ontario and Richard Lippe

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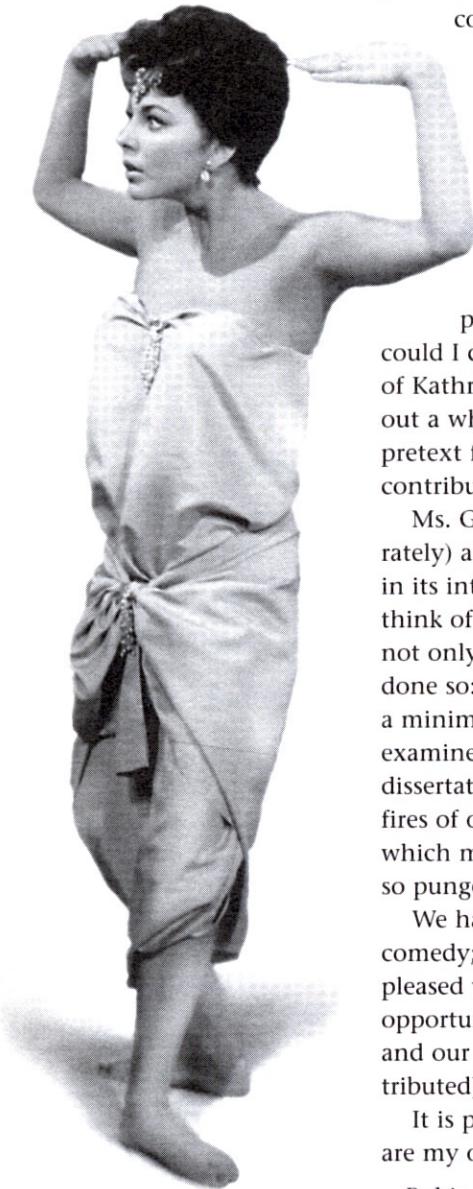
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IN THIS ISSUE



I want to open by forestalling a possible objection. I am of course aware that an unusually large portion of this issue has been written by myself, and it will appear that I have greedily seized upon the opportunity to create a 'vanity' issue. And I must confess that I experienced great pleasure in writing my two articles and in talking with Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, who proved as interesting, communicative and companionable as his movies. But another factor—a 'mitigating circumstance', if you like—should be taken into account. We have, as our readers must have noticed, and as a journal that entirely lacks such amenities as an office or any administrative assistants (on which we are reluctant to lavish our funding), fallen behind again; I was determined to catch up. At the same time my theme—movies that either went direct to video or received only a very limited theatrical release, a 'discovery' issue in other words, for which I had such hopes for the revelation of unknown masterpieces—elicited only two responses. Under the circumstances, what could I do but fill it out myself, and quickly? Partial salvation came in the form of Kathrina Glitre's essay on screwball comedy. I had long wanted to bring out a whole issue on the subject, and its unexpected arrival gave me a pretext for making this an alternative theme and adding a long-planned contribution of my own.

Ms. Glitre's essay will be categorized (understandably and to a degree accurately) as 'academic', but I feel that it is so in the best sense, that it transcends in its intelligence and sense of personal commitment what today we tend to think of as 'academia'. Academia, especially at Ph.D. level, insists that students not only have read everything and everyone but *demonstrate* that they have done so: there must be quotations and references on every page and (it seems) a minimum of forty footnotes (which no one reads, though I've noticed that examiners always look to see if there is a sufficient number) per chapter of a dissertation. Nothing could be calculated more effectively to extinguish the fires of original thought and creativity (for good criticism is always creative), which must always find expression through a personal voice. As D.H. Lawrence so pungently put it, 'If you've got something to say, say it and say it *hot*'.

We have, then, an issue of three distinct sections: a section on screwball comedy; one on the original 'available on video' project (I was especially pleased with Tony French's enterprising choice of *Susana*, which gave me the opportunity to commemorate the centenary of one of cinema's greatest artists); and our annual coverage (to which all five of *CineAction*'s editors have contributed) of the Toronto Film Festival.

It is perhaps unnecessary for me to add that the opinions expressed above are my own and are not necessarily shared by other members of the collective.

—Robin Wood

FORTHCOMING ISSUES

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NUMBER 56: Shifting Narratives

We welcome submissions and correspondence.

SCREW BALL



The Awful Truth: Lucy (Irene Dunne) gets her divorce, and custody of the 'child' (Asta)

The Same, But Different

THE AWFUL TRUTH ABOUT MARRIAGE, REMARRIAGE AND SCREWBALL COMEDY

by **Kathrina Glitre**

There is a moment early in *The Awful Truth* (1937) when Lucy Warriner/Irene Dunne, having decided to divorce her husband, Jerry/Cary Grant, telephones their lawyer. Rather than cutting to the interior of a suitable office, the scene cuts to a large but gloomy drawing-room, filled with old-fashioned lumps of furniture. The telephone is answered by a man with silvery-gray hair and a moustache; his role as lawyer clearly mirrors a patriarchal role—the Law of the Father. Discovering the reason for Lucy's call, the lawyer's jovial tone turns to benevolent concern, and he attempts to lecture Lucy on how "Marriage is a beautiful thing". As he speaks, his own wife enters the room; she hovers in the background of the frame, repeatedly interrupting him.

Lawyer: As I was saying, Lucy, [smiling and sincere], marriage is a beautiful thing, and when you've been married as long as I have, you'll appreciate it too.

Wife: [stepping forward and speaking quite crossly] Your food is getting ice cold. You're always complaining about your food. How do you expect me -

Lawyer: [interrupting angrily] Will you shut your big mouth! I'll eat when I get good and ready and if you don't like it you know what you can do! So—shut up! [Turns away again] Lucy, darling [soft and gentle], marriage is a beautiful thing!

The couple's age and stiff appearance and their outdated décor evoke a past era. The Victorian myth of domestic bliss is casu-

ally ripped to shreds, even as the voice of its authority—the lawyer/patriarch—attempts to reassert its value. Patriarchal authority is undermined further by the fact that Lucy clearly does not take his advice: the next shot is of the chancery court, and while the lawyer is present at the divorce hearing, he does not say a word.

Bearing this moment in mind, there is an evident tension between the diegetic representation of marriage and the screwball narrative's drive to unite the couple. Marriage is never a "beautiful thing" in screwball comedy; it is always a problem. No one simply falls in love, gets married and lives happily ever after. Instead, the central couple *pretend* to be married (*If You Could Only Cook* [1935], *Midnight* [1939]); pretend they are *not* married (*The Palm Beach Story* [1942]); *think* they are married (*Mr. and Mrs. Smith* [1941]); or get divorced (*His Girl Friday* [1940]). Engagements are made to be broken (*My Man Godfrey* [1936], *Bringing up Baby* [1938], *Holiday* [1938]), implied adultery abounds (*She Married Her Boss* [1935], *The Awful Truth*, *Topper* [1937]) and bigamy seems almost inevitable (*Libeled Lady* [1936], *My Favorite Wife* [1940], *Too Many Husbands* [1940]). Every variation on the theme of marital duplicity and infidelity is made use of in screwball comedy. Indeed, there are hardly any happily married characters: it is a world peopled with widowed fathers, maiden aunts, bachelor butlers and maids. Thus, although the central couple are inevitably united at the end of the film, the exact status and conditions of this relationship should not be too hastily or unequivocally identified with the traditional institution of "marriage", let alone with the convention of "living happily ever after".

It is this tension between the union of the couple and the representation of marriage that I want to review in this article.

If marriage is not a beautiful thing, the question remains, what is it? A closer look at *It Happened One Night* (1934) elucidates the cycle's attitude. Ellie Andrews/Claudette Colbert is already married to King Westley/Jameson Thomas, but according to her father/Walter Connolly she will "never [...] live under the same roof with him." "Living under the same roof" clearly functions euphemistically for the sexual consummation of the marriage, but it proves to mean much more, since Ellie *does* live under the same roof with Peter Warne/Clark Gable, while pretending to be his wife (cf. Cavell, 85-86). Is "marriage" constituted by the social and legal fact of the wedding ceremony, or by the personal and physical act of "living under the same roof"? Further questions develop when Ellie and Peter convince two detectives that they are married by quarrelling. He accuses her of butting in, and the argument quickly turns towards issues of protection, possession and jealousy. Ellie pretends to cry, while Peter shouts at her to "quit bawling", even threatening to hit her; she cowers in her seat in the lower left corner of the frame, while Peter looms over her, oppressively pacing back and forth. This miserable excuse for a relationship convinces not only the detectives, but the camp manager as well: "I told you they were a perfectly nice married couple."

Marriage is commonly understood in the screwball world to involve oppression and confinement; it is "nice" because it is legal and "respectable". At the same time, marriage no longer necessarily involves a lifetime commitment: the narrative demands that Ellie should divorce one husband to marry the man to whom she is pretending to be married. For this reason, I find Thomas Schatz's claim that the film's "two false marriages [...] prepare us for the 'real' marriage at the end" inexplicable (154). It seems far more logical to read the two "false" marriages as undercutting the status of the legal and social institution, especially considering the words of the auto-camp manager's wife at the end of the film: "If you ask me, I don't believe they're married." The paradox that Ellie and Peter are now less convincing as a "perfectly nice married couple" is clearly related to the film's earlier representation of the institution as a battleground of misery, not a playground of fun and games and toy trumpets. Moreover, Ellie and Peter's "difference" is repeatedly coded as eccentric "craziness"—the antithesis of the social stability normally associated with marriage. For example, when Mr. Andrews asks Peter if he loves Ellie, Peter evades the question: "A normal human being couldn't live under the same roof with her without going nutty"; when pushed to answer more directly, Peter yells, "Yes! But don't hold that against me—I'm a little screwy myself!" Apparently, the question of living under the same roof has been answered, and it has just as much to do with being institutionalized for insanity, as with the institution of marriage.

Schatz goes on to argue that "their personal union serves to celebrate integration into the community at large, into a social environment where cultural conflicts and contradictions have been magically reconciled" (155). However, the couple's reunion—the "real" marriage—is not even seen; our last view of Ellie is her running *away* from the altar. The distance placed between the couple and society (including the spectator) seems to indicate a withdrawal from the public sphere, and quite the reverse of the social integration traditionally found in romantic comedy. Even on those occasions when the narrative does

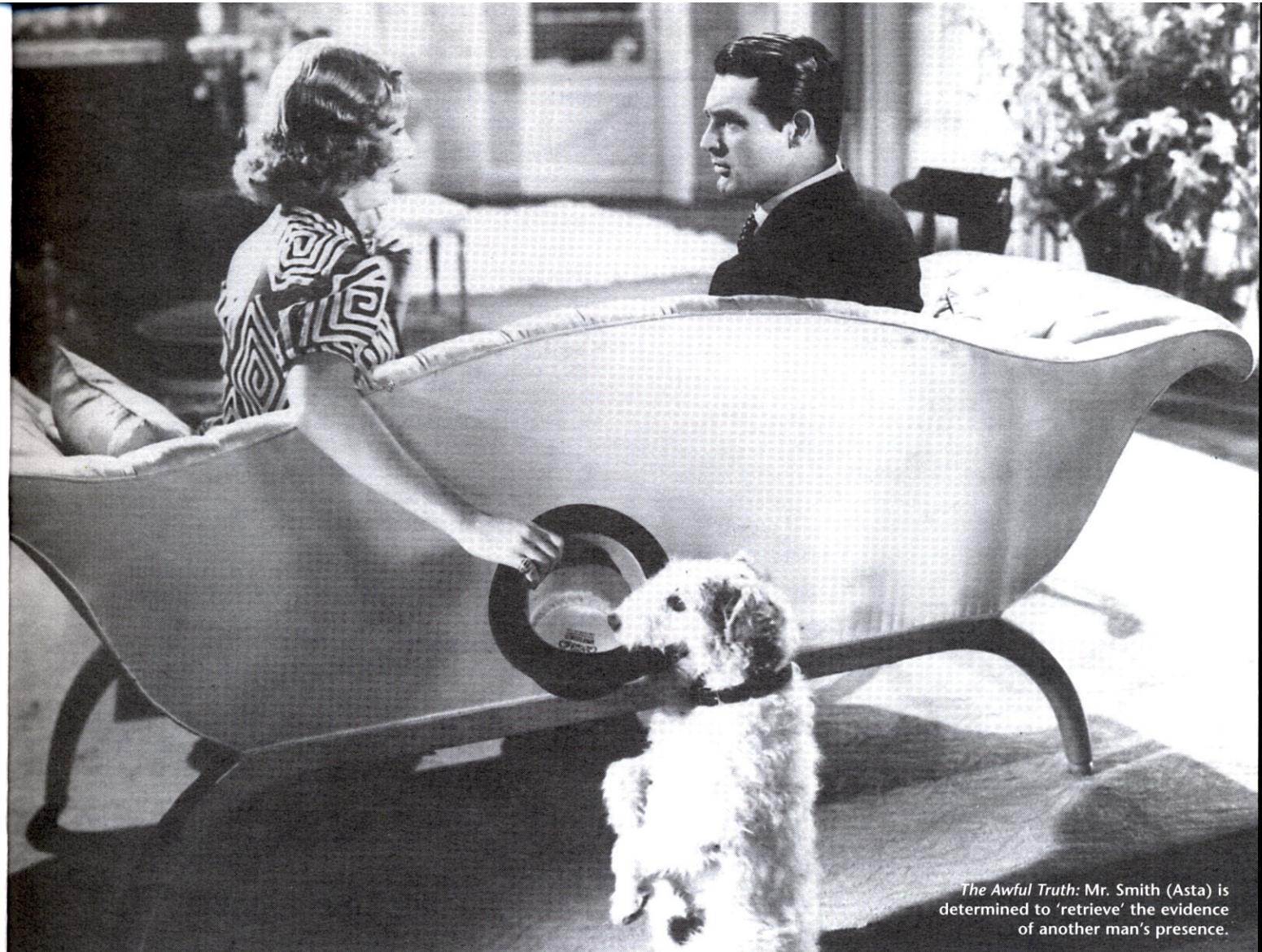
culminate in a wedding, the effect is usually far from affirmative, and only serves to undermine the status of the institution further. A key example is the end (and beginning) of *The Palm Beach Story*, in which the myth of marital bliss is undercut by the use of transparent framed titles—the first declaring "and they lived happily ever after", but the second asking "or did they?" The qualification certainly seems justified if a closer look is taken at the final ceremony. Although the New Comedy conceit of twin siblings manipulates the possibility of a happy ending for all, the actual ceremony belies that possibility: while J.D. Hackensacker III/Rudy Vallee is smiling at his bride, she peers round at her "sister" Gerry Jeffers/Claudette Colbert as if to ask, "What have I got myself into?" before forcing a sickly grin; meanwhile, Tom Jeffers' "brother"/Joel McCrea does a double-take of his bride, Princess Centimilla/Mary Astor, as if to say, "How did I get here?" The presence of the Princess's pet admirer, Toto/Sig Arno, at the end of the line-up (as Best Man?) is the final taunt to the "sanctity" of marriage and the "happiness" of endings.

Despite screwball comedy's remorseless attitude to "beautiful marriage", most critics still presume that the union of the couple is inherently conservative. For example, Wes D. Gehring argues that

The game still has the most conservative of goals: the heroine's madcap maneuvers are often used to capture a male and break him—or save him—from [...] antisocial rigidity. This is best summed up with the term marriage, or the promise of marriage, which ends the screwball comedy, reaffirming one of the most traditional institutions in Western society. (154-155)

In other words, the mere fact of the couple's intimate relationship is automatically and inevitably tied to traditional marriage and reaffirmation of the status quo—irrespective of the thematic and narrative content of the film. There is no alternative for the heterosexual relationship: it must mean marriage, monogamy and social reproduction; it must also mean inequality, confinement and patriarchy. This attitude pre-empts discussion of the films, since it refuses to consider the contradictions of the text. For example, it is unclear how the "heroine's madcap maneuvers" can be equated quite so easily with "traditional" marriage, considering that traditionally marriage is controlled by patriarchy. Disrupting conventional gender roles is just one way in which the screwball narrative complicates and counteracts a preferred reading of conservative reaffirmation.

Part of the problem, therefore, is the critical tendency to collapse the union of a heterosexual couple with the social and ideological institution of marriage: the screwball ending tends, as Gehring so imprecisely puts it, to be "*summed up* with the term marriage" (my emphasis). However, not all screwball comedies end with a proposal, let alone a wedding; there is no mention of marriage at the end of *Holiday* or *Bringing Up Baby*, for example. While marriage may well be implied, this is not the same thing as conservative reaffirmation. It would be literally impossible for a 1930s' Hollywood film, made under the moral guardianship of the Production Code and the Legion of Decency, to explicitly reject marriage as the



The Awful Truth: Mr. Smith (Asta) is determined to 'retrieve' the evidence of another man's presence.

framework for a heterosexual relationship; but this does not necessarily mean that the film endorses that framework. The awful truth for screwball comedy is that there is no alternative to matrimony.

The very term "marriage" is a source of some confusion and a lack of critical precision can indeed make it seem as if the institution is inescapable. For example, David R. Shumway's criticism of Stanley Cavell's work on the comedies of remarriage fails to recognize that he is using the term "marriage" in quite a different sense from Cavell.

Where Cavell goes wrong [...] is his position that the screwball comedies he discusses succeed in enlightening us about marriage itself. My argument is that they do just the opposite: they mystify marriage by portraying it as the goal—but not the end—of romance. The major cultural work of these films is not the stimulation of thought about marriage, but the affirmation of marriage in the face of the threat of a growing divorce rate. (7)

Shumway is referring purely to the *institution* of marriage, presuming it is constituted by the final union and the legal fact; the state of marriage is therefore "mystified", since it is rarely

shown as part of these films' plots. Cavell's use is much broader, however, referring to the *concept* of marriage, which he explicitly disconnects from the necessity of a legal contract: in *It Happened One Night*,

what we have been shown in the [...] auto camps is something like their [Ellie and Peter's] marriage. We know of course that they have not been legally, actually married, but we also know that those things do not always constitute marriage, and we may freely wonder what does. (85)

On some level, both Shumway and Cavell are right: the films tend to mystify the state of marriage by postponing the legal fact until the end of the film; on the other hand, we are clearly meant to understand the central couple's relationship as questioning the constitution of that marriage, and as proposing an alternative model. For if Ellie and Peter's relationship seems "something like a marriage" to Cavell, it is certainly characterized as something like a "not-marriage" by the conventions of the diegetic world. Cavell's use of the term "marriage" confuses the issue: although his discussion may offer an ideal model for the heterosexual relationship, the collapse of any distinction between this relationship and "marriage" effectively reabsorbs the potential space for resistance to the insti-

tutional status quo.¹ (To avoid further confusion, the use of the term "marriage" is hereon restricted to the legal fact).

A further problem arises from the critical tendency to treat marriage ahistorically as "one of the most traditional institutions in Western society" (Gehring), rather than as a culturally-determined convention, whose specific meaning and function alters over time. Even when a connection is made between the rising American divorce rate and screwball comedy, the connection is rarely pursued further. The tendency is to assume, like Shumway, that the "major cultural work" of screwball comedy is the conservative affirmation of monolithic marriage, rather than the—at least potentially—progressive critique and reform of an outmoded version of the institution.² Cavell, on the other hand, recognizes that the emphasis upon remarriage indicates that it is "as if marriage, which was to be a ratification, is itself in need of ratification" (31). Although he does not explicitly place this need for ratification within a material context, his discussion does at least suggest that a specific cultural moment has prompted this narrative interest in the state and constitution of marriage.

For while the fact of marriage may not have changed, the popular conception of marriage was shifting during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly as it related to the meanings and expectations of "love" and "family".³ There was a sense of crisis as divorce rates soared, almost doubling between 1910 and 1940, from 4.5 to 8.7 divorces per 1,000 marriages (Jacobson & Jacobson, 90). Marriage rates dropped, while birth rates reached an all-time low in 1935; the size of the middle-class

family shrank, from an average of six children to two or three. Contemporary debates considered marriage to be in a state of transition, and frequently contrasted an outmoded patriarchal Victorian model to a modern egalitarian concept of love companionship. For example, J.P. Lichtenberger claimed that "the ancient economic-patriarchal form of the family has fulfilled its function and is becoming obsolete [...] Masculine lordship is now being replaced by mutuality or merger [sic] of wills in domestic affairs" (285). The Victorian model was widely understood to be founded upon economic considerations and gender inequality, with arranged marriages and the strict separation of male/public and female/domestic spheres. Moreover, a "sex-negative Victorian culture was thought to have suppressed the awareness of the sexual underpinnings of marriage" (Steven Seidman, 76).⁴ Although coitus was an accepted part of Victorian marriage, moderation was recommended and the act was supposed to be brief and missionary; it was a necessary means to a procreative end—not an expression of love. Sexual desire and sensuality were considered base and egotistical, threatening both the spiritual nature of love and the social "responsibility" of procreation. Sexual desire was also a distinctly male prerogative, and the double standard prevailed: while the beastly husband struggled to contain his vile passions, the "cult of true womanhood" placed the morally and sexually pure wife on a pedestal.

In the age of the "New Woman" and the flapper, such constrained images of female sexuality and behavior were simply no longer acceptable; indeed, it was commonplace to attribute

The Awful Truth: Jerry watches his (almost) ex-wife while she and her suitor (Ralph Bellamy) watch his new girlfriend perform.



the “changing morality” to the demands of the emancipated woman. The traditional stereotypes of female sexuality (passive, indifferent, disinterested) were being undermined by the actions of these women. Increasing emphasis was being placed upon mutual sexual satisfaction and, for the first time, it “function[ed] as a standard of a happy and successful marriage” (Seidman, 66). This potentially radical acknowledgement of female sexuality was usually qualified, however, by the reiteration of conventional gender traits: the female was generally still cast as the more passive and sensitive partner, with the male in control of the situation.

As women were becoming more overtly sexual, sex was becoming divorced from its procreative function. Victorian marriage had been predicated upon procreation, but modern couples were actively avoiding having children, despite legal prohibitions on contraception. Unsurprisingly, birth control was seen as playing a major part in the changing ideology of marriage; indeed, according to Ben Lindsey, “Birth Control [...] brought the Companionate [Marriage] into existence” (v).

Lindsey defined this new form of marriage quite specifically: “Companionate Marriage is legal marriage, with legalized Birth Control, and with the right to divorce by mutual consent for childless couples, usually without payment of alimony” (v). Companionate Marriage was recognized as a co-existing alternative to the traditional “Family” marriage (indeed, should a Companionate couple have a child, then the marriage would automatically revert to the traditional concept). Moreover, barring the legal aspects, Lindsey repeatedly asserted that Companionate Marriage was not an innovation, but a reality—at least for those middle-class couples with enough education and wealth to employ birth control methods and lawyers.

Companionate Marriage, in Lindsey’s sense, required a specific institutional system, but as the term became popularized it was understood to redefine marriage in more egalitarian terms, reflecting the increased independence of women. With time, “companionate marriage” also became conflated with the more general sense of “love companionship”, emphasizing emotional compatibility and mutual interests. Love was the new catchword in talking about marriage. For example, according to Ludwig Lewisohn, marriage should not only “be held to be created by love and sustained by love”, but that love should involve a “precise blending of passion and spiritual harmony and solid friendship” (200). In other words, “love” was no longer a wholly spiritual emotion; it also incorporated sexual fulfillment and companionship.

Modern love not only extended into the bedroom, therefore, but also into the public domain of shared leisure activities. It is no coincidence that the increased emphasis on personal happiness and on enjoying pursuits together corresponded with the rise of consumerism. It certainly shaped the future of personal relationships—not least with the development of “dating” in the 1920s. By its very nature, dating necessitated consumption, since it took place in the public sphere of cinemas, diners, and dance halls. Thus, while Victorian habits had emphasized economy and self-restraint, modern consumerism and leisure demanded that people not only spent money, but that they should enjoy doing so. This entailed a fundamental shift in the American consciousness, succinctly described by Martha Wolfenstein as “the emergence of [...] ‘fun

morality.’” As Wolfenstein observes, “fun, from having been suspect, if not taboo, ha[d] tended to become obligatory. Instead of feeling guilty for having too much fun, one [was] inclined to feel ashamed if one [did] not have enough” (168).

Once these economic and social changes had been set in motion, not even a stock market crash could reverse the process. With the onslaught of the Depression, the hedonistic impulses of the twenties were abruptly arrested, but their ideological repercussions were still being negotiated. By 1939, it was clear to James Harwood Barnett that “the social conception of the nature of marriage has greatly altered and that modern marriage is increasingly regarded, by the middle classes especially, as a highly personal relationship, rather than as an institutional, social relationship” (32). This new form of marriage involved crucial shifts: from duty to pleasure; from spirituality to sexuality; from social responsibility to personal satisfaction. Most importantly, the basic unit of this marriage was no longer the family; it was the companionate couple.

It is probably worth spelling out some of the implications these wider cultural issues have for screwball comedy. The “patriarchal” Victorian marriage was explicitly being denounced as outmoded: it was repressed, rooted in gender inequality, tied down with responsibility, and absolutely no fun. Screwball couples not only eschew the responsibility of having children (“babies” are leopards and dogs), but eschew *all* responsibility and behave like children. The screwball relationship is rooted in having “fun” (which, by the power of the Production Code, also means sex) and this fun is repeatedly formulated in terms of revitalizing marriage. If this process of revitalization is seen as a metaphor, rather than as a reactionary reaffirmation, then “remarriage” can involve replacing the old model with the new: the same, but different.

The Awful Truth provides a well-defined demonstration of this metaphorical transition. The lawyer/patriarch’s concept of “beautiful” marriage is visually associated with the outmoded Victorian model of separate spheres and “domestic bliss”. Jerry and Lucy’s divorce complies with Lindsey’s sense of Companionate Marriage: divorce by mutual consent for a (wealthy) childless couple, with no payment of alimony (Jerry inquires, “You’ve never asked for money, and ... well, do you need any?” The answer is no). It is as if this divorce is an intermediate stage, however, since it is initiated through the collapse of Jerry’s double standard: “What wives don’t know won’t hurt them.” He has spent two weeks pretending to be in Florida, but is disconcerted to discover that Lucy is not dutifully awaiting his return, especially when she finally does appear in dazzling evening dress, closely followed by a hand-

1 For this reason, this article’s title (“The Same but Different”) is deliberately intended to echo Cavell’s chapter on *The Awful Truth* (“The Same and Different”). The slight change is integral to my navigation of Cavell’s arguments: “but” opens up space for negotiation, while “and” collapses this space.

2 Tina Olsin Lent’s “Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy” proves an exception, providing a detailed overview of the cultural context; unfortunately, the films themselves are treated too simplistically. Published in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick & Henry Jenkins (New York & London: Routledge, 1995).

3 The following analysis inevitably involves a white, middle-class bias; marriage is a notoriously bourgeois institution, and middle-class attitudes predominate both in contemporary discussions and in screwball’s representation of marriage.

4 In recent years, historians have revised these stereotypes of Victorian sexuality and marriage (see Seidman, 16-17).



The Awful Truth: Irene Dunne and Cary Grant.
Bringing Up Baby: Cary Grant in big trouble, Katharine Hepburn as 'Swinging-door Suzie'.

some Frenchman, Armand Duvalle/Alex D'Arcy. It is indicated to the spectator (through performance style, convention and cliché) that Lucy is telling the truth about her overnight adventure—in which case, the question remains, why is Jerry so quick to seek a divorce? The issue at stake is not so much Lucy's innocence or guilt (and even less so Jerry's), but Jerry's discovery that Lucy is not dependent on his presence. It is the shock of discovering her autonomy that proves too hard to bear.

The turning point in Lucy and Jerry's separation comes after the recital fiasco. Jerry stumbles in uninvited, still determined to believe that Lucy is having an affair with Armand, but Lucy displays no anger at Jerry's own impromptu "performance", only amusement. As he finally rights himself, hair in his eyes and a drawer in his hand, Jerry looks at Lucy and raises his eyebrows; her answer turns the final notes of her song into vibrato laughter, and she is still laughing when the dissolve brings up the next scene. It is this fiasco which forces Lucy to admit, "I'm still in love with that crazy lunatic and there's nothing I can do about it." She is compelled to remember the "grand laughs" that she and Jerry used to share. It is this sense of having fun together, therefore, which becomes all important, and it is no coincidence that the laughter of the recital is reversed and reinforced by Lucy's second "performance" as Jerry's socially-unacceptable "sister", Lola, at the Vances' stuffy party. Lucy demonstrates an equal willingness to appear ridiculous, and Jerry is the only one who appreciates her act; while the Vances shudder, he simply cannot help laughing.

Lucy's active pursuit of Jerry raises the issue of gender roles in screwball comedy. Whereas social convention was still rooted in essentialist gender traits and the idea of complementary gender roles, screwball comedy takes gender one step further, inverting convention to further disrupt patriarchy. *The Awful Truth* begins by placing the spectator in a highly privileged position, aligned with Jerry's point of view: we are privy to an overtly masculine world (the inner sanctums of the Gotham Athletic Club) and to a male conspiracy of silence ("What wives don't know ..."). In this masculine world, Jerry is incredibly self-confident—certain of his ability to deceive, and thereby control, his wife. The film then systematically inverts this



initial state of masculine omnipotence, undermining Jerry's complacency (and our confidence in his authority) before realigning our sympathies with Lucy (around whom most of the plot action revolves). Ultimately, it is Lucy who orchestrates their reconciliation, through a liberating process of masquerade, social and legal transgression, and seduction.

It is Jerry who must change his attitude, and his re-education is made all but explicit at the Vances' party:

Jerry: [somewhat pompously] Oh, Barbara—you can't have a happy married life if you're always suspicious. No—there can't be any doubts in marriage; marriage is based on faith, and if you've lost that, you've lost everything.

Although Jerry claims, "I think I read it in a book or something," this little speech in fact repeats Lucy's words almost verbatim ("... there can't be any doubts in marriage: the whole thing's built on faith. If you've lost that—well, you've lost everything"). I must take issue with Cavell, therefore, who attributes the original speech to Jerry (234 & 244). It is vital to understand that Jerry has learned a lesson, and that this lesson was not learned in a book, but from Lucy. His pomposity in repeating her words only serves to emphasize his self-delusion, and his pride prepares the spectator to expect another fall (promptly provided by Lucy's masquerade). It is not until the final scene of the film that Jerry can fully acknowledge his error:

Jerry: [...] you're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different, except in a different way [...] You're still the same -only I've been a fool. But I'm not now.

Lucy: [murmurs] Oh!

Jerry: As long as I'm different, don't you think that, well, maybe things could be the same again—only a little different, huh?

The confusion of terms in this speech (which again echo words spoken by Lucy, in the preceding sequence) encapsulates the process by which their relationship has been transformed: things are the same, because they will continue to be married; but things are different, because the constitution of that marriage has changed.

Cavell's misrepresentation of the "marriage is based on faith" speech raises concerns about his understanding of the comedies of remarriage. He repeatedly argues that

the man's lecturing indicates that an essential goal of the narrative is the education of the woman, where her education turns out to mean

her acknowledgement of her desire, and this in turn will be conceived as her creation, her emergence, at any rate, as an autonomous human being. (84)

Quite apart from the implication that the male hero "creates" the woman, this completely ignores the fact that "the man's lecturing" is usually mocked or proven unsound. Cavell cites Peter's lectures in *It Happened One Night* as key evidence: the equation of correctly dunking doughnuts with becoming autonomous is baffling; but ignoring the fact that it is Ellie who succeeds when Peter's hitch-hiking demonstration fails is inexcusable. Elsewhere, "lectures" are given by: Walter Burns/Cary Grant (*His Girl Friday*)—a proven liar, cheat and manipulator; David Huxley/Cary Grant (*Bringing up Baby*)—who is constantly ignored; and Charles "Hopsie" Pike/Henry Fonda (*The Lady Eve* [1941])—who even Cavell acknowledges "is treated to [a relentless] exposure of pompous self-ignorance" (56). Nonetheless, Cavell apparently still believes his lesson worth learning.

A level of patriarchal assumption underpins not only Cavell's argument, but also the general critical tendency to posit the female as the "problem" in screwball comedy. The effect of such arguments is to overemphasize the education of the female, at the expense of the male, leading to an unbalanced view of the cycle's conflicts and resolutions. The male's desires can prove just as problematic as the female's, and the majority of screwball comedies involve a certain amount of mutual re-education. For example, *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936) first centers upon Michael Grant's/Melvyn Douglas's "education" of Theodora Lynn/Irene Dunne. He likens her life in Lynnfield to jail and lectures her to "Break loose, be yourself and tell Lynnfield, 'Go take a jump.' [...] It's the only way you'll ever be a happy, free soul." Once Theodora has told Lynnfield where to go—declaring her love for Michael in the process—he disappears; she follows him only to discover that he is trapped in a loveless marriage to please his father. Theodora returns the favor by liberating Michael: "You're living in a jail too—you can't call your soul your own!" What is particularly striking about their



Irene Dunne and Melvyn Douglas in *Theodora Goes Wild*

respective family "jails" is their overt gender determination, reinforced by domestic/public and rural/urban conflicts. Theodora lives with two maiden aunts in a small town named after her family, while a black sheep uncle lives in the city; her behavior is restricted by small-town values and conventional feminine domesticity (including gossip). Michael's father is Lieutenant Governor and a city banker, and it is the patriarch's public dignity which must be protected at all costs; Michael's divorce must be postponed until his father's retirement from office. In both cases, liberation entails breaking free from the constraints imposed by family and social mores.

Like Theodora, most screwball heroines acknowledge their own desire before the heroes acknowledge *any* desire (*She Married Her Boss*, *My Man Godfrey*, *Bringing Up Baby*). It is the male who must learn to accept the female's desire, and the education that takes place does not necessarily demand the female's "emergence" as an autonomous being, but rather the male's *recognition* of her (existing) autonomy. For example, in *It Happened One Night*, Peter describes his ideal love: "If I could ever find the right sort of girl [...] Someone that's real, someone that's alive—they don't come that way anymore." The camera closes in on Peter's face as he settles back against his pillow and daydreams:

She'd have to be the sort of a girl who'd, well, jump in the surf with me, and love it as much as I did [...] You know, nights when you 'n' the moon 'n' the water all become one, and you feel you're part of something big and marvelous [...] Boy, if I could ever find a girl who was hungry for those things.

Visibly moved, Ellie takes action, breaches the blanket-boundary and acknowledges her desire: "Take me with you, Peter. I love you. Nothing else matters." Peter's initial reaction is rejection. Ironically, Cavell expresses Peter's problem well:

What surprises him is her reality. To acknowledge her as this woman [of his dream] would be to acknowledge that she is "somebody that's real, somebody that's alive," flesh and blood, someone separate from his dream [...] and this feels to him to be a threat to the dream, and hence a threat to him. (100)

It is precisely a question of recognizing her autonomy that is at stake here, and Peter's misrecognition is emphasized by the fact that what did happen one night was exactly the stuff of his dream: he and Ellie have already frolicked in the water, under the stars and moon, while crossing the river (cf. Cavell, 99-100). Peter also has a lesson to learn, therefore, but—unlike Ellie who displays an admirable flexibility and willingness to learn—he stubbornly clings to his stagnant rules, claiming an authority which he cannot prove, let alone maintain. It would seem that the male's lecturing has far more to do with clinging to his own threatened power than with educating the female.

In this sense, the screwball heroine does represent a "problem"—the autonomous, desiring New Woman—but screwball comedy does not punish her for her actions. Nor do the hero's lectures reform her. Susan Vance/Katharine Hepburn is not transformed at the end of *Bringing Up Baby* into the dutiful, pas-

sive wife; Lucy Warriner does not submit meekly to the authority of her husband; and Hopsie Pike is only too glad to rediscover the transgressive Jean Harrington/Barbara Stanwyck after his encounter with her alter ego, the Lady Eve. This, if nothing else, should verify that screwball comedy is about more than just reaffirming traditional gender roles. The question of the absent mother is also worth mentioning in this respect. According to Cavell, "Mythically, the absence of the mother continues the idea that the creation of the woman is the business of men" (57). However, if the corresponding absence of children is taken into account, there is a more obvious reason for this general absence of the mother: procreation is not the point; it is the autonomous individual which is at stake. The absence of procreation in these films directly relates to the cultural transition from the family-based patriarchal marriage to the couple-oriented companionate marriage: the screwball couple want to make love, not babies. Similarly, the absence of the mother reflects the diminished influence of the domestic sphere, allowing the female into the public domain beyond the conventional space of gender destiny.

Screwball comedy is concerned with creating a more egalitarian heterosexual relationship, therefore, and part of this concern involves the disavowal of romance. The screwball couple never fall in "love at first sight", but come to appreciate each other through their shared misadventures. Consequently, the central metaphor for romantic love—the embracing kiss—is subordinated or denied altogether. In *The Awful Truth*, Lucy and Jerry's relationship is defined by shared laughter; the only embrace we see is a quick peck on the cheek in their first scene together. The couple's reconciliation, and its sexual consummation, is left implicit: Lucy's last word is a laughing "Goodnight." We are left watching the cuckoo clock once more, as it strikes quarter to midnight (fifteen minutes before their divorce becomes final); this time, the boy figurine skips around to follow the girl figurine back through her door. Similarly, the couple retreat behind closed doors at the end of *It Happened One Night* and *The Lady Eve*, while the final embraces in *Love Crazy* (1941) and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* occur just out of frame. In each case, it is sex—not romance—which is implied.

Even those screwball comedies which do include an on-screen embrace usually do not treat it in a conventionally romantic way. Virginia Wright Wexman has argued that "The movie kiss represents a privileged moment of romantic bonding [...] Customarily this moment is designed to highlight the expression of romantic fulfillment on the face of the woman, who is foregrounded by a key light while her male partner remains in the shadows" (18). In other words, the romantic embrace focuses attention upon the passive object of desire (the woman's carefully-lit, soft-focus face) and conforms with conventional understanding of the power structures of the gendered look. It is an image which anyone familiar with classical Hollywood film should recognize, but it is not one found in screwball comedy. The screwball embrace offers quite a different spatial representation, symbolizing the equality of the couple. The couple face each other, not the camera, creating a balanced division of frame space; indeed, they are often seated, de-emphasizing the male's height, so that the couple's heads are relatively level. The shot/reverse shot articulation of looks is noticeably absent from these sequences: the couple remain

together in the democratic two-shot while the spectator remains outside the space of their embrace. The camera also maintains its distance, and the screwball embrace is rarely seen in anything closer than a medium shot.

The final embrace in *Bringing Up Baby* offers a clear illustration of this argument. There is certainly nothing conventionally romantic about David and Susan's courtship, which is spent changing identities as often as clothes, chasing dogs and leopards, and systematically destroying property. Ultimately, their relationship is ratified by David's words: "I've just discovered that was the best day of my whole life [...] I never had a better time!" It is this anarchic fun which David translates into "I love you, I think," and his qualification applies as much to the appropriateness of the word "love" to their relationship, as to its instability. As the final vestige of patriarchal society—the dinosaur—collapses at their feet, David hoists Susan up to his platform. The couple sit facing each other, symmetrically sharing the frame space of a medium long shot; even as they embrace, the spectator is excluded, since they turn their heads away from the camera. Of course, Susan acts first, embracing David while telling him how he feels, to which David can only sigh, "Oh dear! Oh my!" before relinquishing all control and returning her embrace. Cavell describes this embrace as "notably awkward" (120), but, in the circumstances, how could it be anything else? A conventional romantic close-up would be far more incongruous. The film's theme returns. The image cuts to an extreme long shot of the couple on the scaffold. Fade to black. And they lived happily ever after.

Or did they? Cavell feels that the collapse of the dinosaur casts a shadow over the happiness of this ending, and has trouble accepting that David should still *want* to embrace Susan, as his work lies in ruins (121). However, the internal logic of the film demands the collapse of the dinosaur, as the symbol of all that is wrong with society: stagnation, repression, capitalism, and patriarchal sexuality (cf. Britton, 41). The film does not ask us to imagine what comes next; the couple are literally left in mid-air, in a moment of total chaos. Cavell recognizes the "ambivalence and instability" (124) of this couple's mode of sexuality, but rather depressingly insists on pointing out that "the situation between this pair cannot remain as it is" (124). The obvious reason for this is that the couple cannot *really* escape patriarchal society. Their triumph is both symbolic and fleeting; it is a Utopian moment, not Utopia.

Far from reaffirming the status quo, screwball comedy maintains a precarious balance between total anarchy and stable resolution. Whether the couple retreat behind closed doors, set sail for another country (*She Married Her Boss*, *Holiday*, *The Lady Eve*) or just sit in midair, the screwball ending typically places the couple in limbo. As Andrew Britton argues, "It is an essential characteristic of the couples created at the end of these films that they cannot exist in established bourgeois society" (39). Consequently, the screwball ending is distinctly anti-social: instead of festive integration, the cycle insists upon the couple's extraordinary status in society. While I consider the couple's antisocial privacy to coincide with their progressive potential (representing their rejection of patriarchal sexuality and society), Shumway reasserts a conservative meaning:

since these are thoroughly bourgeois comedies, there is no

sense of festival accompanying the marriage. Marriage is a private matter [...] The ending leaves the couple isolated in their own bliss [...] In other words, there is no possibility of *post coitum triste*, but rather the explicit denial of the temporality of satisfaction. It is in this illusory eternity that marriage is rendered mystical, in spite of whichever of its realities the film has indulged earlier. (16)

Once again, the heterosexual couple cannot win: social integration reaffirms the status quo; but privacy is bourgeois romanticism. To the extent that screwball comedy assumes the importance of the subjective personal relationship, Shumway's argument is right: these films "solve" the problems of one extraordinary couple; they do not change the social system, nor challenge the material realities of inequality. However, the films themselves acknowledge both the extraordinary status of the couple, and the instability of the resolution: the same, but different. It is the sense of flux that most clearly informs the cycle's concept of remarriage. Screwball comedy insists that the couple must keep on playing, keep on reinventing themselves, and keep on learning to love each other. The "illusory eternity" of just living happily ever after is wholeheartedly demystified.

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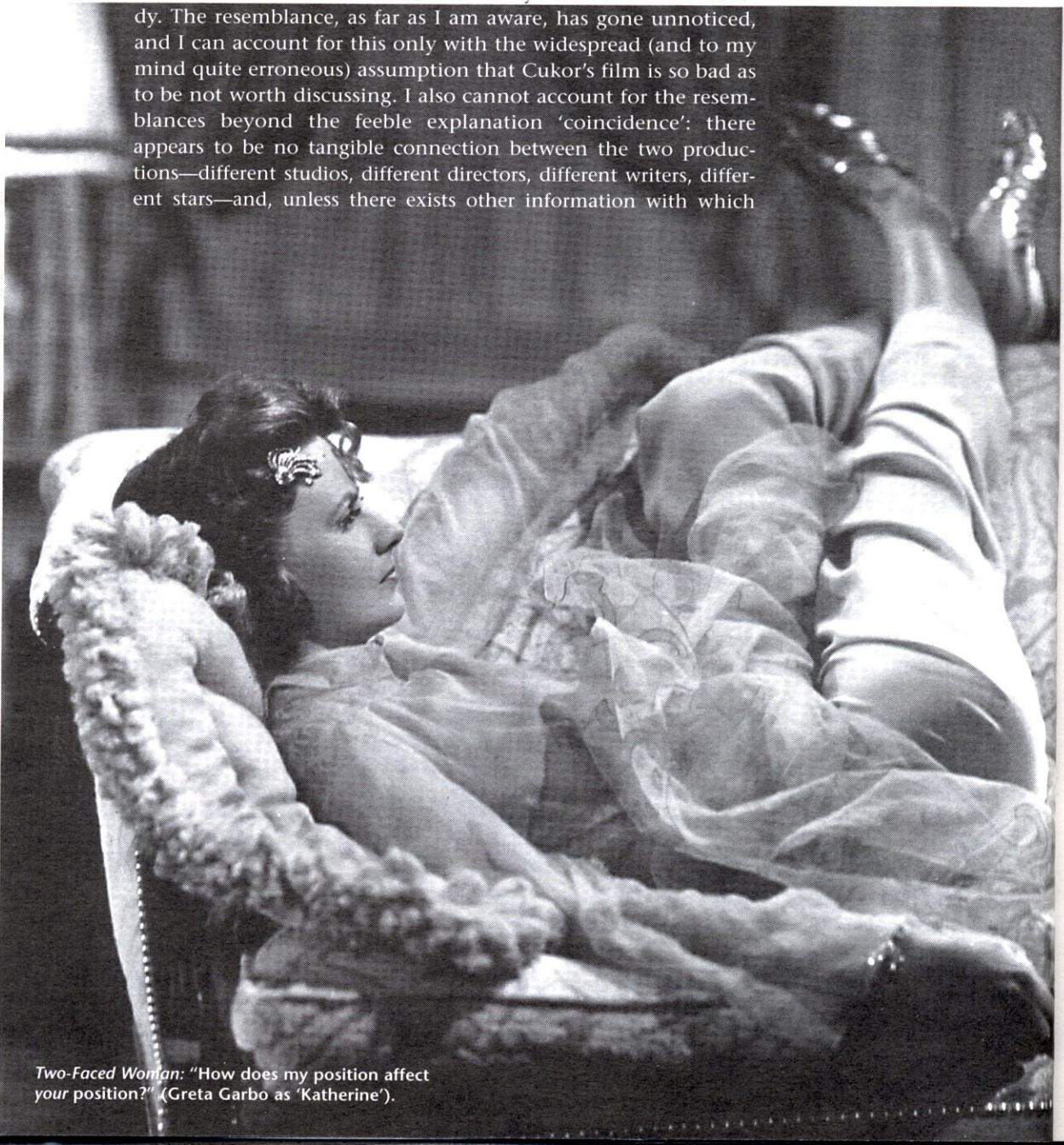
by **Robin Wood**

Screwball and the Masquerade

THE LADY EVE AND TWO-FACED WOMAN

1. Resemblances

Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* and George Cukor's *Two-Faced Woman* both appeared in 1941. I have long been struck by the fact that they share an identical basic trajectory. In this they are closer to each other than either is to any other screwball comedy. The resemblance, as far as I am aware, has gone unnoticed, and I can account for this only with the widespread (and to my mind quite erroneous) assumption that Cukor's film is so bad as to be not worth discussing. I also cannot account for the resemblances beyond the feeble explanation 'coincidence': there appears to be no tangible connection between the two productions—different studios, different directors, different writers, different stars—and, unless there exists other information with which



Two-Faced Woman: "How does my position affect your position?" (Greta Garbo as 'Katherine').

I am not familiar, insufficient time to hypothesize direct influence or deliberate imitation. The basic resemblance from which all the rest follow—woman empowered by the 'masquerade'—is not of course a device common only to these two films: it was foreshadowed in two of the earlier great screwballs, by Katherine Hepburn's inspired improvisations (notably her 'Swinging Door Susie') in *Bringing Up Baby*, and more closely by Irene Dunne's climactic masquerade as her own sister in *The Awful Truth*. But it is much more fully developed in the Sturges and Cukor films, being central to the plot development of both. Their common trajectory can be summed up as follows:

i. A man and a woman from quite different 'worlds' meet and fall in love, the meeting taking place within the woman's domain.

ii. They separate, the man returning to his own world.

iii. The woman follows him, infiltrating his world while masquerading (unknown to him) as her own sister (illegitimate in Sturges, twin in Cukor), a totally different personality of extraordinary charisma. (In both films the comedy highlight and core of the movie is clearly the masquerade itself, the prelude and coda thinner in texture and invention, though Sturges, the practised specialist in his own idiosyncratic brand of comedy, can cram every sequence with 'touches', interplay, inspired bits of business).

iv. The man falls in love with the 'twin'.

v. The woman returns to her own world and her original persona.

vi. The man follows (deliberately in Cukor, inadvertently in Sturges, where the woman sets up the reunion unilaterally), facilitating the traditional 'happy end'.

Readers who know *Two-Faced Woman* only from the commercial video, the only form in which the film is currently available, will object that this account ignores a crucial difference: the man sees through the masquerade from the outset and knows throughout that the 'twin sister' is a fiction. But if you only know Cukor's film in this version, then you don't know Cukor's film. Explanation follows:

2. *Two-Faced Woman: a tale of two versions*

The sad story of what happened to Cukor's movie has been told already in *CineAction 35*, very thoroughly and eloquently, by Richard Lippe, and for a full account readers are directed to his article. I have carefully refrained from rereading it because I prefer to rephrase matters in my own words, in the interests of freshness, and a clear understanding of the whole sorry affair is crucial to my argument here. But all the detective work was done by Richard, and our estimates of the film are I believe very close. The story of how we became aware of the gulf that separates the two versions is curious enough to be worth telling.

One summer a number of years ago Richard and I left for our annual vacation, leaving the apartment in charge of our

resident cat sitter. Shortly before we departed we found that a commercial TV channel was telecasting *Two-Faced Woman*, at that time unavailable in *any* version and virtually a lost film, so we left instructions for its taping during our absence. Our cat sitter carried this out but taped at low speed and of course included all the commercial breaks. We watched the film and, while finding it unsatisfactory, thought it much better than its reputation had led us to expect, funnier, livelier, if leaving a somewhat unpleasant aftertaste. When the official MGM commercial video appeared, we bought a copy immediately, intending to wipe the TV taping. Fortunately—indeed almost miraculously—Richard (one of the world's leading Cukor scholars) watched the new video before the old one got wiped, and immediately became aware of numerous incidental differences, especially during the second half, which no longer seemed anywhere near as fresh and amusing. We already knew the film's history in outline but not in detail—how, after its completion, it was denounced by the very influential Legion of Decency as unfit for the entertainment of Catholics and other moral citizens, and hastily revised by MGM, already worried about the box-office reception of a film that radically transformed Garbo's image. Richard's research revealed the details. In the original version, Melvyn Douglas does not discover until almost the end of the film that the woman claiming to be his wife's twin sister is in fact his wife. The Legion's major objections arose from this simple fact—the fundamentally unacceptable plot development was that Douglas is seduced by, and gets to the brink of an actual sexual relationship with, the woman he believes to be his wife's sister. The solution seemed at first simple as well as obvious: in the scene where Douglas is first confronted with the alleged twin, in a New York night club, the studio inserted a two-minute scene where he sneaks downstairs to phone the ski lodge, discovering that his wife has left for New York, greeting the news with a typically smug, understanding look, a kind of 'Aha, so *that's* what she's up to'. Presumably at first this seemed sufficient, because our TV taping corresponds to it exactly, the additional scene being the only change made: curiously, a number of prints must have found their way into the world at that point. However, it soon became apparent that the single addition was not enough. For one thing, it didn't satisfy all the Legion's objections, which included overly revealing attire and certain lines of suggestive dialogue; for another, the later parts of the film, as shot, no longer quite made sense if Douglas knew all along what was happening and was merely play-acting to get one up on his wife. Consequently, various cuts were made, scenes were partially reshot, and close-ups of Douglas were inserted showing his 'knowing' expressions and sense of superiority and power. (One example of a lost moment: Douglas is pompously carrying on about the necessity of considering his 'position'; Garbo sprawls seductively on a couch in a flimsy negligee, her knees in the air, and murmurs languidly 'How does *my* position affect

your position?" The instance seems scarcely more shocking than, say, Walter Slezak's response to Cary Grant's phallic saxophone in *Once Upon a Honeymoon*—"I hope that doesn't keep up all night"—not to mention Bogart and Bacall's notorious horse-racing dialogue in *The Big Sleep*, neither of which the Legion found it necessary to protect us from, and it is possible that it was cut by MGM because Douglas's concern about his 'position' made little sense if he already knew that Garbo was his wife). Armed with this knowledge, I swiftly made a (somewhat clumsy) transfer of the TV tape, editing out the scene of the phone call (together with all the commercial breaks); it is my belief that we now have a faded, badly duped, clumsily edited copy, with somewhat less-than-digital sound, of Cukor's original version.

I very much hope it is not the only copy now extant! Does not MGM retain somewhere in its vaults a beautiful pristine negative of Cukor's original, which it will one day spring upon a surprised and delighted world of film lovers, thereby vindicating the work simultaneously of Garbo and Cukor and adding an only-slightly-flawed masterpiece to the existing roster of great screwball comedies? One can but dream. And no, dear reader, I cannot make you a copy of our tape, thereby risking a major lawsuit and lengthy incarceration which, approaching my statutory three-score-years-and-ten, I don't think I am quite up to or, like Peter Sellers, could welcome as 'all part of life's rich pageant'. So don't even think it...

The alterations are examined in detail in Richard's article (cited above); though mostly brief and apparently trivial (but losing some of the funniest lines), they change the whole nature of the film. It would be difficult to over-emphasize their radical and drastic effect. If Douglas does not know the twin sister is his wife, then she is empowered and he becomes a helpless fool, just and satisfying punishment for his conceit, male presumption, and total lack of consideration for her feelings; if he *does* know, the joke is on her, the audience sees through his eyes, from *his* position of knowledge, and she is merely making an embarrassing idiot of herself. The effect is so distasteful that we cease to find her behaviour (or Garbo's performance) funny. One might go so far as to claim that it was not MGM and Cukor who destroyed Garbo's career, but the Legion of Decency and the tyrannical pressure it was at that time able to exert. Anyone with even the most casual commitment to feminism will feel with me that the Legion, in its high-mindedness, turned a salutary and thoroughly moral work into an immoral and indeed actively offensive one.

All future references to the film in this article are of course to the original version.

3. Differences

While the overall trajectories of the films are so similar, it is at least equally important to stress the differences—it is, after all, in the detail of a film's realization that the individual creativity that gives it its particular distinctiveness and distinction becomes manifest, whether that creativity derives from writer, director, stars, etc., etc., or from the creative interaction among them. We are dealing here with two very different films, and I think today this can be recognized and celebrated. Film criticism/theory seems to have extricated itself at last from that assumption (not so long ago) that by reducing a film to its plot

manoeuvres you could demonstrate that it was really indistinguishable from hundreds of others, and of no more and no less value (if value was even allowed as a criterion).

i. Plot. The common scenario outlined above is complicated by numerous variations. They are mostly incidental to rather than definitive of the major differences, but seem worth tabulating for the sake of completeness. In the interests of concision I shall distinguish the two films by the names of their directors.

a: In Cukor the couple are married *before* the masquerade; in Sturges they are married during it. This may have exacerbated the censorship problems of the former, adding to infidelity the far worse crime of potential adultery.

b: In Cukor the masquerade is spontaneous, an invention on the spot to meet an emergency (and not even the invention of the masquerader—it is instigated by Ruth Gordon, then gleefully adopted by Garbo); in Sturges it is carefully calculated, planned and deliberate. Further, it is differently motivated in the two films: in Cukor Garbo's primary motivation is to regain her husband's love (though we may intuit, in her alacrity in embracing the masquerade with such enthusiasm, a spontaneous and at that point instinctive response to the possibility of freedom and power it offers); in Sturges, Stanwyck's is, on the surface at least, pure revenge, the thorough humiliation of the man who ditched her, though we are aware that beneath the anger she is still in love with him.

c: In Cukor the masquerade is revealed near the end of the film, before the final reunion; in Sturges it is not revealed within the film (Stanwyck's last line suggests that she is about to "fess up", but Fonda's reaction is withheld). The point of both is that the man now accepts the woman as her 'real' self, though surely in Sturges our confidence in their future is somewhat disturbed by the fact that he still doesn't know the whole truth. (Our confidence in the reunion in Cukor is more thoroughly undermined by the impossibility of the whole relationship, but this is a failure of the film, glossed over rather than—in Sturges—the probable intention).

d: There is an interesting difference (a virtual reversal, in fact) between the two masquerades, based on what we may loosely call the woman's status and respectability. In Cukor, a faithful, committed, thoroughly moral wife masquerades as a loose, promiscuous, highly eroticized free spirit; in Sturges a petty criminal (a professional 'card sharp') masquerades as a titled British noblewoman.

e: Another interesting difference lies in the effect (or lack of it) of the masquerade on the masquerader. In Cukor the woman is partially seduced by her own performance, as if she were discovering a previously hidden side of herself which she rather likes even while she is shocked by it; she can't help enjoying the sense of liberation and empowerment. The film is silent as to whether she will ever find a way to incorporate this permanently into her life and character. But the plot development affects not only the character but the star. Garbo herself, somewhat awkward in the early scenes (and Cukor does not seem at ease with slapstick), springs to vibrant life from the moment her Karen becomes Katherine Borg, the twin sister. The nightclub sequence (shorn of the disruptive phone call, which already seriously jeopardizes its effect), culminating in 'Katherine's' spontaneous invention, with the cooperation of

an extremely enthusiastic Latin-American drummer, of the Chica-Choca, deserves recognition as one of the great screwball sequences, hilarious and exhilarating. But if Karen is released, here, from her persona of snowbound skiing instructress, Garbo expresses an equal sense of release from her 'doomed romantic' persona (clearly enough evoked in the early scenes of marital quarrel), and clearly relishes it: she is magnificent here.

In Sturges, contrariwise, the woman adopts an obviously absurd and incongruous persona purely as a means toward revenge; by the film's end she has discarded it, reverting to her former (if now reformed?) personality and life-style quite unproblematically.

f. Slapstick. Screwball comedy relates to 'romantic' comedy on the one hand (construction or reconstruction of the couple the ultimate goal) and to slapstick or 'crazy' comedy on the other. (I developed this point more fully in my article on *My Best Friend's Wedding*, in my view the one contemporary attempt at screwball comparable to the great achievements of the 30s and 40s, in *CineAction* 52). It says something quite important about the nature of the two films under discussion that *The Lady Eve* can accommodate outbursts of slapstick quite comfortably while *Two-Faced Woman* all but eliminates it. In the latter, in fact, it erupts only at the film's beginning and end, in Melvyn Douglas's mishaps on skis, which are in any case not very funny ('corny' is the word that comes to mind): they tell us nothing except that he can't ski. Henry Fonda's

pratfalls, on the other hand (during the elaborate society party given in honour of 'the Lady Eve Sidwich' in person), are perfectly integrated in the film's texture, expressing the extremeness of his discomfiture when the honoured celebrity shows such an uncanny resemblance to the woman he first fell for then repudiated.

g. The endings. The resort to slapstick at the conclusion of *Two-Faced Woman* (a desperate attempt to conceal the barrenness—or, I suppose, to give it a credit I doubt it deserves, to express the openness—of its resolution) merely succeeds in underlining the impossibility of ending the film in any way that would be acceptable to Hollywood studios of that era and probably to audiences. There is only one acceptable ending: Garbo, having demonstrated thoroughly that her husband is an arrogant, complacent and quite unreformable heel and asshole, tells him Thank you very much and to please go back to your oh-so-important editorial work on your useless magazine and get out of my life. It is difficult to imagine such an ending being found acceptable within the parameters of classical Hollywood comedy. One might argue that the film does its best by having Douglas subjected to the final humiliation of plunging on skis from a considerable height into a pool of ice-cold water. But little short of a nuclear holocaust seems likely to wipe that smug, superior smirk off his face for long.

This might be taken as the most extreme case of a phenomenon my fellow contributor Ms. Glitre touches on in her



Two-Faced Woman: 'Katherine invents the Chica-Choka.



Two-Faced Woman: The open air life, a midwinter swim (Greta Garbo as Karen).

article in this issue, the difficulty of ending *any* screwball comedy—because, even if the film succeeds in establishing an authentic screwball couple (which *Two-Faced Woman* emphatically does not), where are they to go, how are they to live, in a non-utopian culture that clearly has no place for them? The ending of *The Awful Truth* works well enough because Grant and Dunne are a much less extreme screwball couple than, say, Grant and Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*, and they haven't travelled *that* far from where they were at the outset, Grant having simply learnt not to presume upon male privilege. Among the other great screwballs, much the same might be said of Grant/Rogers in *Monkey Business* but certainly not of *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys*, even though there again the couple are simply reverting to their original marital status—the marriage was in total disorder, and nothing in their situation has changed significantly. The ending of *The Lady Eve*, while far less jarring than that of *Two-Faced Woman*, offers its protagonists scarcely more convincing a future. But Sturges, it seems to me, recognizes this, whereas *Two-Faced Woman* attempts, quite unsuccessfully, to make us forget the problem. In both cases 'the end answers the beginning', the traditional formal signifier of closure, which is popularly supposed to satisfy us but seldom does. Stanwyck knows which ship Fonda is sailing on and installs herself in the dining-room prepared for the ritual re-enactment of their original meeting. Once again she trips him up

with her foot, but this time instead of being embarrassed and apologetic he is relieved. We may ask why he is now able to forgive her so easily, to overlook her criminal activities. Only, surely, because his union with the Lady Eve has proven so unimaginably much worse, which can hardly strike one as a firm basis for a relationship. When, on top of this, Sturges leaves us in the dark on the crucial issue of knowledge (how will Fonda react when Stanwyck lets him into the secret?), we must suspect that Sturges is knowingly drawing on his endless supply of scepticism deliberately to undermine our possible satisfaction. We should also recall that, much earlier in the film, Sturges had already planted in our minds the relevant fact that Jean/Stanwyck and her father will no longer need to resort to their professional endeavours if she marries Fonda, 'Hopsy' being the heir to a beer empire. I would add that all of this renders the more remarkable what is arguably the most authentically satisfying of all screwball closures, the resolution of *My Best Friend's Wedding*, which does *not* involve the (re)union of the romantic couple but emphatically refuses it. But that became possible only with the recent transformation in social attitudes to the status and acceptability of gayness and the contemporary crisis of confidence in the marriage union.

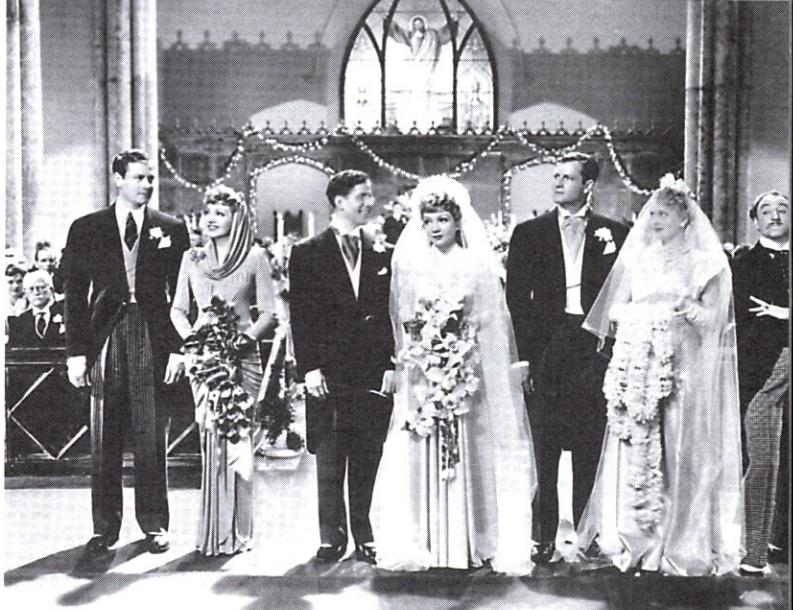
These, however, are subordinate differences. The major differences involve the very different star and directorial personalities involved.

ii. *The female stars.* Both films (but Cukor's much more obviously) seem tailored to the personas of their female stars. The situation that ultimately produced *Two-Faced Woman* is well-known: Garbo's career was in decline, her popularity waning; with World War II looming ominously (the film was first released in the aftermath of Pearl Harbour, not the most propitious moment to offer the public a seemingly frivolous farce), her romantic exoticism and personal isolationism ('I want to be alone') both on and off screen had become unfashionable, even perhaps to many distasteful. The attempt to humanize and democratize her by diverting her into comedy, begun in *Ninotchka* where the transition is explicitly acted out, was to be completed in the overtly screwball *Two-Faced Woman* (and might well have been successful had the film not incurred the wrath of the Legion of Decency). The film plays directly upon certain aspects of her persona while carefully eliminating others (as Katherine, she is anything but aloof or inaccessible), drawing especially on the connotations of her Swedishness: as Karen, she plays a skiing instructress at a winter sports resort, with all the associations of nature, health, fresh air, snow, exercise, athleticism, etc., that that entails. Correspondingly, the film produces a clear in-joke about her earlier image, perhaps to draw attention to the distance she has come from it, having Melvyn Douglas say, 'Alone. Do you know what that word means? If you don't, look it up in the dictionary'. Also relevant here are her accumulated connotations of romantic vulnerability, her capacity for pain, quite potently present in the film's early sequences, which is one of the factors that makes this such a very different kind of comedy from *The Lady Eve*. The shock comes with the masquerade and her assumption of a flamboyant and publicly flaunted sexuality. I think it can be argued, further, that it is Garbo's presence that makes eruptions into slapstick inappropriate: that the lingering aura of potential tragedy from her established persona continues to haunt a

film that, generically, clearly can't afford to allow it free expression once the narrative develops. There is no such problem with Stanwyck: she is hurt, certainly, by Fonda's refusal even to give her a fair hearing, but we are confident she will get over it, because Barbara Stanwyck, unlike Garbo, could get over practically anything, short of being shot by Fred MacMurray.

Stanwyck, in fact, is much harder to pin down, given her astonishing range and the diversity of her roles (from 'the great man's lady' to Phyllis Dietrichson, or from Stella Dallas to the leader of the Forty Guns), each of which she appeared to encompass without the least sense of strain. But *The Lady Eve* draws very clearly on certain more or less permanent aspects of the persona: toughness, worldliness, lower-classness, a resilience by no means incompatible with vulnerability, possible unscrupulousness, even brutality (tempered by an equally possible tenderness), a sturdy, self-protective, at times almost cynical sense of humour. Her transformation into the Lady Eve Sidwich is perhaps not as shocking as Garbo's transformation into super-sexual, totally amoral and abandoned free spirit, but it is just as remarkable in performance, both stars appearing to enjoy their respective masquerades every bit as much as their fictional characters. Both might well have received Oscar nominations if there was any justice in the world of the Academy.

iii. *The male stars.* The central weakness of *Two-Faced Woman*, be it said at once, lies in Melvyn Douglas, both the actor and the character. I have always found the Douglas of this period (he was to give splendid performances in his old age) somewhat distasteful, his familiar, too-practised charm and suavity spurious and alienating, compromised by an irreducible smugness. Others will doubtless respond to him differently. In any case, it is the unpleasantness of the character that causes a problem in *Two-Faced Woman*: why does Garbo fall in love with him (significantly offscreen), why does she bother to retrieve him when he has so egoistically dumped her for his obviously worthless job and a far more obviously congenial woman (she hesitates briefly over this, seduced only by the lure of the masquerade), and what possible future have they together, especially given her by that time at least potentially divided persona? The film seems, perversely, to underline its male protagonist's unpleasantness and superficiality. Confronted with his position as the editor of a vastly important weekly called 'Tides and Currents', he can virtually forget his new wife's existence in three minutes flat, the man's world being of incomparably greater significance than the woman's ('Over three million people read my magazine weekly and I decide its policy. That's much more important than anything you could possibly say'—the depth of his seriousness, his 'policy', and his sense of responsibility to his readers having already been defined quite clearly in his remark that 'There's no sex appeal in statistics') This represents a relatively minor problem in the original version, where we do not have to like him and can enjoy his seduction and discomfiture at the hands of his wife's hypothetical twin; it is nothing short of a catastrophe in the bowdlerized version, for reasons that will now be abundantly clear, adding greatly to its anyway unpleasant flavour. The corollary of this is that the greater strength and integrity of *The Lady Eve* is largely due to the inspired casting of Henry Fonda (most other things being equal), playing a comic variation on his persona of impregnable innocence and uprightness, here relative-



TOP *My Best Friend's Wedding*: P.J. Hogan directing Julia Roberts.

CENTRE *The Palm Beach Story*: The 'happy ending' as absurdity.

BOTTOM *Monkey Business*: wife and 'other woman'.
(Cary Grant, Ginger Rogers, Marilyn Monroe).



ly uncomplicated by intelligence. The interplay between Fonda and Stanwyck, playing characters who could easily have become annoying (respectively, too stupid and too manipulative), is unfailingly delightful, a marvel of comic timing, expression and nuance.

iv. *Supporting cast.* On paper, *Two-Faced Woman* would appear to have an extremely strong supporting cast: Constance Bennett, Roland Young and Ruth Gordon were all polished comedians. They are, however, underused and largely wasted (the notion that Bennett 'steals' the picture from Garbo is patently ridiculous); they virtually drop out during most of the film's second half, where it becomes essentially an unbalanced dialogue for its two stars, Douglas playing little more than 'straight man' to Garbo's captivating comic performance. *The Lady Eve*, on the contrary, benefits enormously from Sturges' wonderful stock company of supporting comic actors (especially, here, William Demarest and Eric Blore), with the rich addition of Charles Coburn and Eugene Pallette (no one will be likely to forget his first appearance, with his inimitable rendering of 'Come landlord, fill the flowing bowl'). They, together with the Fonda/Stanwyck chemistry, are responsible for the

sense we must have that the film's texture is altogether richer and denser than that of Cukor's film.

v. *Directors.* Sturges was one of a small handful of directors during Hollywood's classical period who can be accounted an auteur in the fullest sense. He wrote and directed his own films and was effectively (if not in name) his own producer, working without interference (at least during his regrettably short major period at Paramount). (He also apparently produced *Vendetta* for Howard Hughes, and in the course of it destroyed with his own interference what should have been the first American film, and a potential masterpiece, of Max Ophuls. For a full account see Lutz Bacher's enthralling *Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios*, Rutgers University Press, 1996). Perhaps the most pervasive characteristic of the great Sturges comedies (aside of course from their seemingly inexhaustible comic inventiveness) is an extreme scepticism (often teetering on the brink of total cynicism) about human relationships. Can we have any faith at all in his happy endings? Aren't they invariably undercut, whether subtly or blatantly? That of *The Palm Beach Story* is deliberately and outrageously absurd; just how long are Betty Hutton and Eddie Bracken going to be able to

endure each other's company after the curtains close on *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*? The only solution that Sullivan finds at the end of his travels to the social problems of his world is that a lifetime of misery can be made bearable by a few minutes of infantile laughter. The resolution of *Unfaithfully Yours* conspicuously withholds any evidence (beyond the lady's very dubious word for it) that Linda Darnell has not been unfaithful to her husband and will not continue to be whenever the opportunity presents itself. If Sturges seems to gravitate toward the female characters of his films (and sometimes the balance seems about equal, notably when the male lead is played by Joel McCrea), it seems to be because they are smarter, running rings around their mates who tend to be either arrogant and blustering (Harrison in *Unfaithfully Yours*) or innocent up to and beyond the verge of stupidity (Fonda in *The Lady Eve*), rather than because they require our sympathy. He clearly relishes Stanwyck's ability to seduce and subsequently humiliate Fonda, the all-time lovable schmuck.

Cukor, on the other hand, is notoriously difficult to define. Rightly, today, seen as an auteur, but in an altogether looser and more elusive sense of the term, he was essentially a splendidly sensitive realizer of other people's material, but frequently also at its mercy (*The Philadelphia Story* is perhaps the most eloquent instance of both sides, in execution among the most brilliant of all Hollywood comedies, yet ultimately quite distasteful morally and politically). He was a wonderful collaborator with actors, especially (but by no means exclusively) female actors, and he was clearly drawn as by a magnet toward female characters struggling to defend and define themselves within a male-controlled world, and to resist definition by men. As soon as one sees this it becomes clear that *Two-Faced Woman*, as realized by Cukor before its ruination, was central to his interests and sympathies, by no means marginal as generally believed. His work with Garbo in the film seems to me, in its very different way, the equal of their universally celebrated collaboration in *Camille*, to which *Two-Faced Woman* can be read as a companion-piece, at once congruent and opposite.

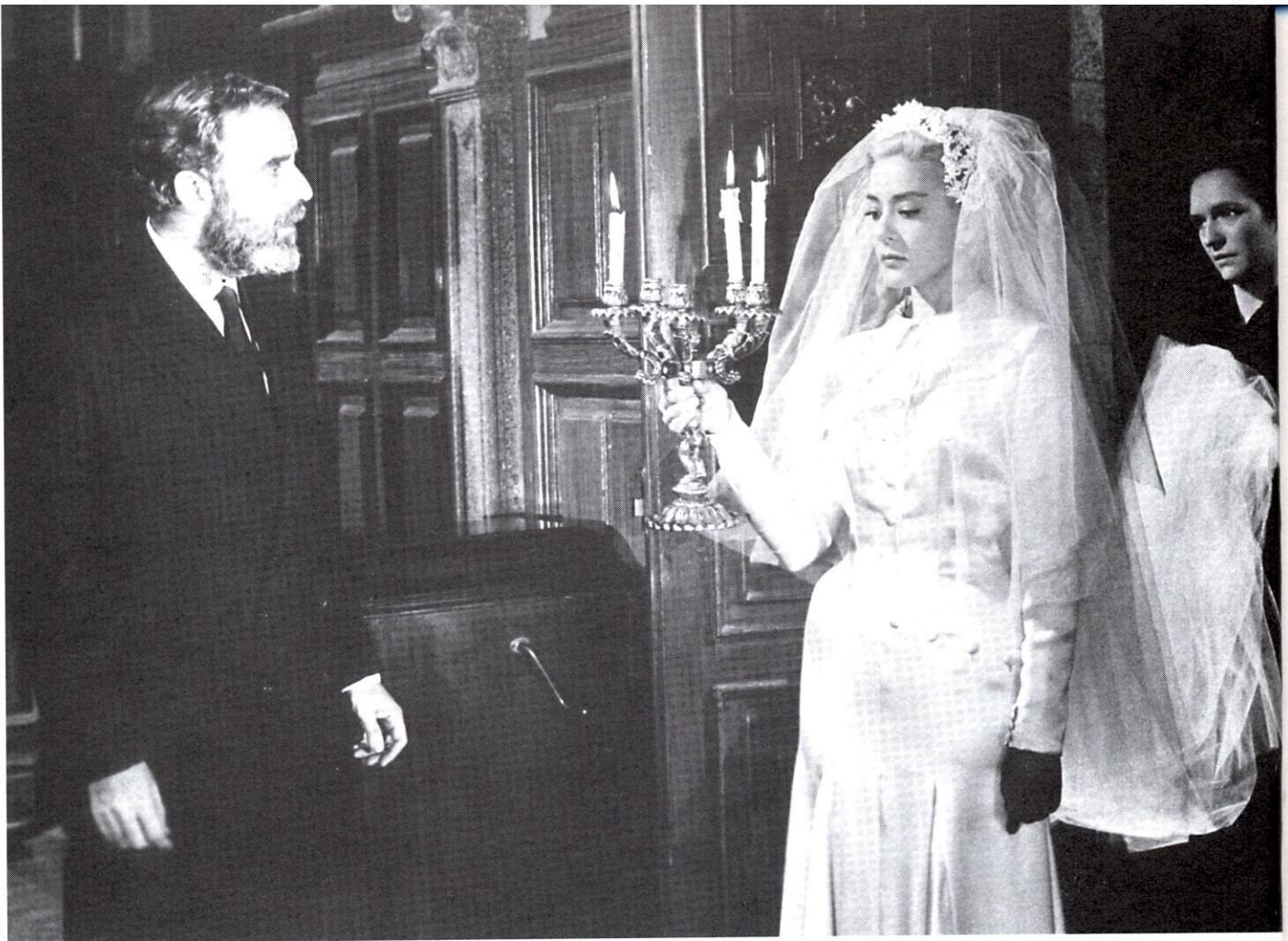
4. Conclusion

Two-Faced Woman, even in its original version, is seriously flawed; *The Lady Eve* is among the virtually perfect films of the classical Hollywood period. Few, I suppose, will wish to argue with this, but there is more to be said. If *The Lady Eve* is the more fully achieved, satisfying, consistently funny film, *Two-Faced Woman* is in certain respects the more interesting, the issues it raises more resonant. Garbo's masquerade has far greater resonance, is far more challenging and 'dangerous', than Stanwyck's hilarious (and marvellously written) impersonation of the British aristocracy; it acts not only as empowerment and defiance of male authority but as liberation, raising questions about repressed alternative personalities, while Stanwyck is merely play-acting, enjoying herself while she relishes Fonda's discomfiture. Melvyn Douglas's male presumption, his pompous over-valuation of his own lifestyle and career and his casual and unreflecting dismissal of Garbo's as trivial, makes him a far more formidable and deserving object of satire than Fonda's endearing schmuck, whose worst offence is a sort of sheltered/spoiled rich kid innocence. His only crime, after all, is not to trust a woman he knows to be dishonest, and his failure



McCarey's *Rally 'Round the Flag Boys*: husband's night out (Joan Collins, Paul Newman).

to recognize her sincerity when she somewhat abruptly reforms. And Fonda's punishment, one might argue, is twice as brutal as Douglas's yet only half as well-deserved. Sturges is merciless: does he perhaps go too far when he has Fonda not only descend from the train in the middle of nowhere, of the night, and of a torrential downpour, but then fall flat on his back in the mud? Nor can Sturges resist cynically undermining Fonda's own sincerity when he has him repeat, partly verbatim, the romantic speech with which he proposed to Stanwyck on the ship, when he proposes to her again in her assumed persona. I shall have to risk seeming prudish and something of a spoilsport (though I think I have sufficiently demonstrated that I love Sturges's film up to and beyond the point of adoration), but it does seem necessary to suggest that the sort of 'smartness' that is the Stanwyck character's dominant characteristic is scarcely among the highest of moral virtues, and that Sturges (lacking any confident belief in others) tends to overvalue it. With Garbo's Karen/Katherine there is simply so much more at stake. Given the irresistibility of its manifest and manifold delights, it is perhaps churlish to suggest that, in the last resort, *The Lady Eve* cannot do a great deal beyond entertain.



LUIS BUÑUEL

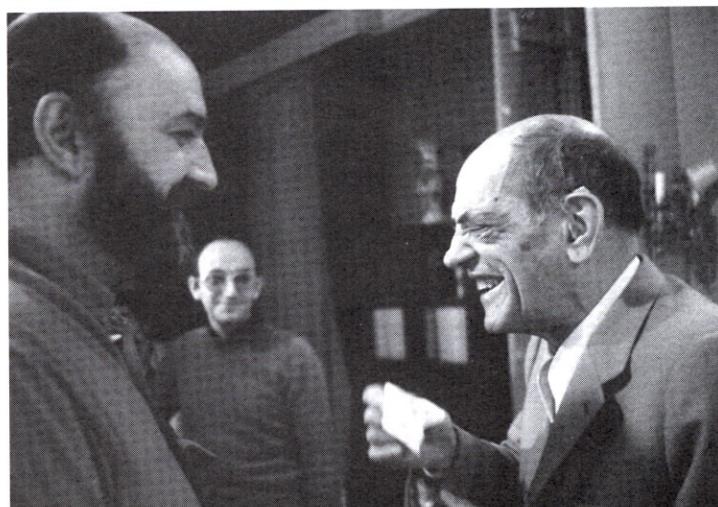
1900 – 2000

(I'm still
an atheist,
thank God!).

—LUIS BUÑUEL



Viridiana:
(top) Attempted
rape of the
bridal virgin.
(left) The final
three-handed
card game.

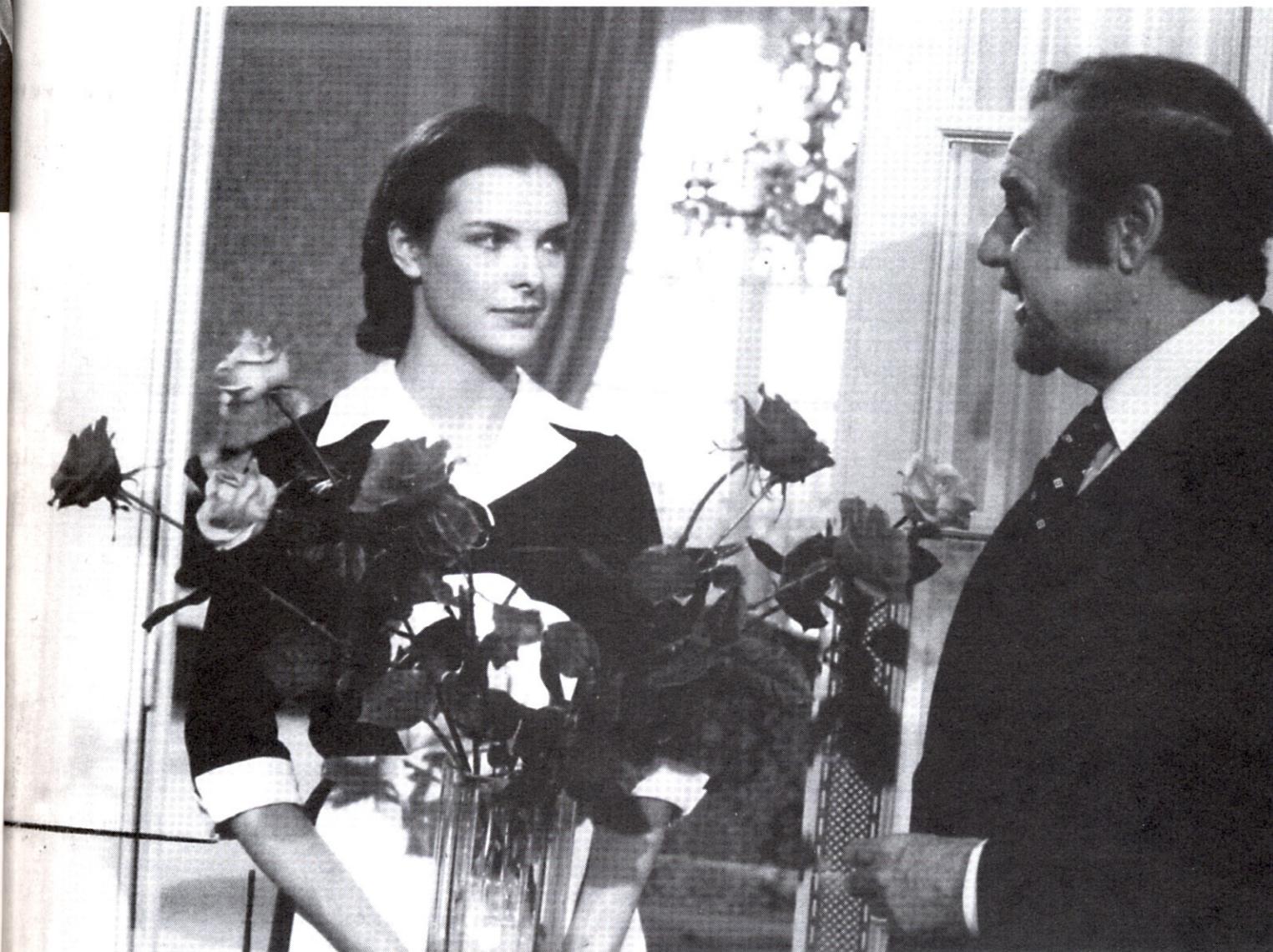


*Le Phantôme de
la Liberté:*
Director and
assistant—
Buñuel shares
a joke with his
son.



*Le Charme Discret
de la Bourgeoisie.*

*Cet Obscur Objet
du Désir.*



by **Tony French**

Handy-Dandy

BUÑUEL'S SUSANA

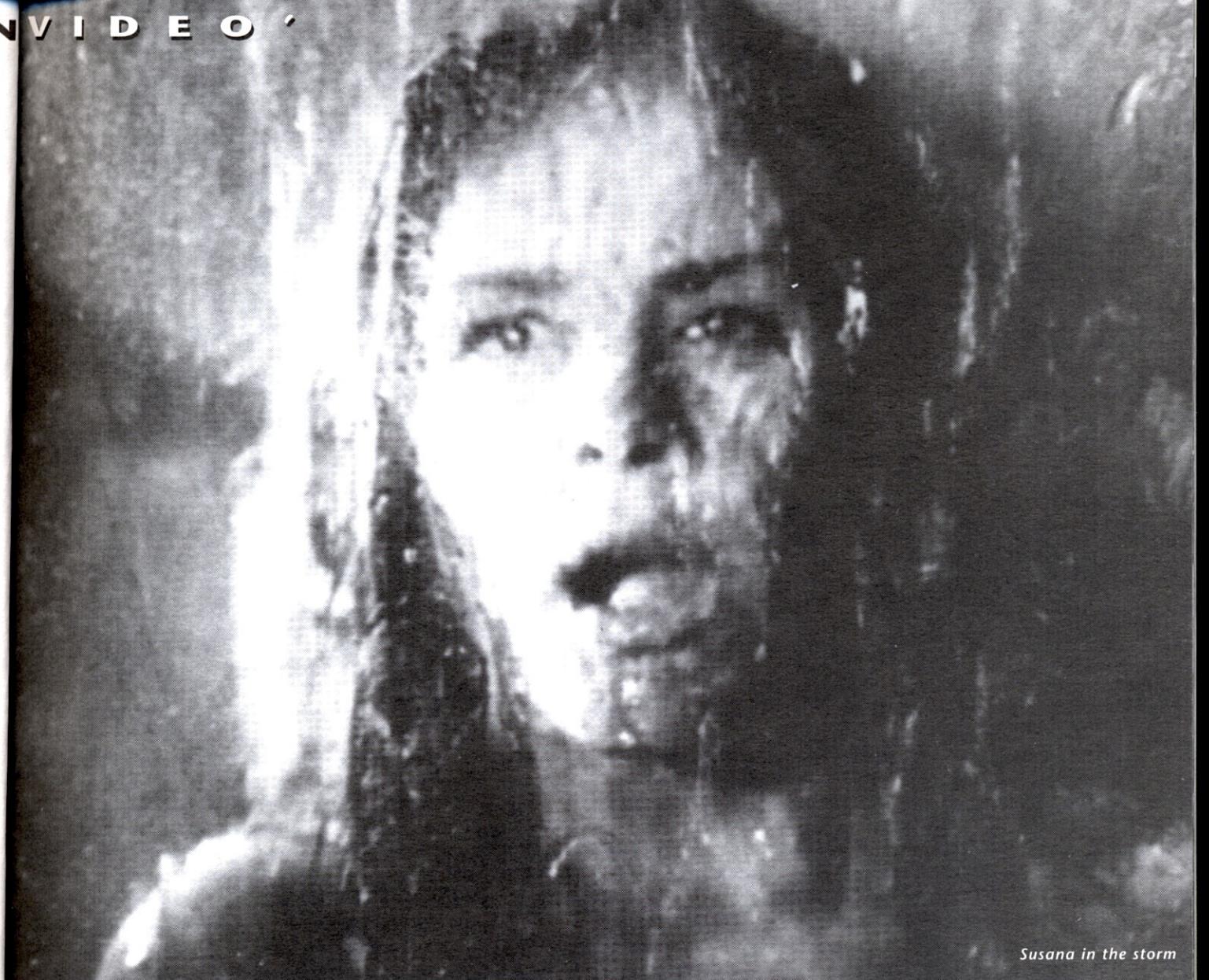
"...see how yon justice
rails upon yon simple thief...
change places and, handy-dandy,
which is the justice, which is the thief?"

(King Lear, IV.vi)

Fifty years ago I went to my university library to look for some books to help me write an essay on *Hamlet*. Browsing through a little-frequented part of the stacks, I chanced on a book (whose title I have long forgotten) written in the 1860s by an Anglican clergyman, a Dean, I believe. According to his account of the play, Claudius "stood for" the forces of Reaction and Despotism in the Europe of the nineteenth century (including the Catholic Church of course), while Hamlet himself stood for all the forces of enlightenment, progress, nationalist self-determination, religious toleration (except of Catholics, naturally), universal suffrage (save for women), and a bi-cameral legislature, which would be opened, when necessary, by a strictly constitutional monarch. I didn't, and don't, know what the good old Dean would have answered had I been in a position to object that the play provides no evidence whatever to suggest that it wants to be, or is capable of being, read in this bizarre way, and that Shakespeare, whatever his other talents, has seldom been credited with the gift of detailed political prophecy. In any case, the play is capable of being read thus—after all, that's how the Dean read it; and if there is nothing in the text to prove him right, equally there is nothing to prove him wrong. Another account of the play, this one much more recent, suggested that the Ghost must have been young Fortinbras in disguise, since only he stands to benefit from the reciprocal extinction of the entire Danish royal house and even its *chef de cabinet*, Polonius. Yet other books put forward interpretations that struck me as no less fantastic and irresponsible.

I open my essay on Bunuel in this oblique and anecdotal way, not in order to burlesque Literary Criticism, or the criticism of the Arts in general (which hardly needs my help to burlesque itself), but so as to suggest that even a quite recent text, such as a film only fifty years old, may also be susceptible of interpretations ludicrously at variance with one another and, in some minds, with the "text" itself. To try and seek out its "correct" meaning, or assume that it has any one (or even several) "correct" meanings, or even that a "text" exists at all, is to ask for something which is simply, and demonstrably, not in the realm of critical discourse at all. If this seems a counsel of despair, I can only retort that despair, too, is a legitimate emotion.

Buñuel left Spain in the 1930s, worked in Paris and elsewhere at dubbing and other cinematically unproductive occupations, went to Mexico in 1947 and stayed for a dozen years, directing his own films. He returned to Spain for *Viridiana* in 1961, and spent the rest of his life either in Spain or in France. *Susana* (1951) is one of his eighteen Mexican films, and as it is hardly as well known as, say, *Los Olvidados* or *Una Mujer sin Amor*, I shall give a brief summary of it here. One stormy night, a wild and beauti-



Susana in the storm

ful girl (Susana/Rosita Quintana) escapes from a Reformatory (we don't know why she's imprisoned there). Out of the storm she stumbles, by chance, into an affluent landowner's household, consisting of middle-aged parents (Guadalupe and Carmen) and a college-aged son (Alberto), together with various servants, including a faithful housekeeper, Feliz, and the steward of the estate (Jesús). Within six days (the time-scheme is meticulously exact), she has almost (?) succumbed to the steward's advances and has slept with the son, while the father has fallen in love with her. Smitten, he dismisses his steward, disowns his son and, on the sixth and climactic night, is about to throw his wife out of the house in Susana's favour, when the police finally catch up with her and drag her back to the Reformatory, literally kicking and screaming. Next day (the seventh), the family comes together again, reunites—close up, as it were: the father, deeply ashamed of his behavior and about to depart for that reason, reinstates the steward and re-owns the son, while the forgiving wife receives him

back into her bosom. The sun comes out, and his favorite mare, at death's door throughout the film, suddenly, perhaps miraculously, regains her health.

I have summarized this story—which is in itself banal enough—as neutrally as I can, excluding from it all indication of motive, blame, and what might roughly be called *tone* (?tragedy?comedy?farce?), and therefore excluding all questions of the film's moral attitude to its characters. But obviously even my toneless précis raises certain questions for us today, even though such questions might not have been obvious, or maybe were obviously answerable, to the audience by whom Buñuel knew the film was in the first instance to be seen half a century ago: a working-class or middle-class audience in a central-American country, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic by religion and therefore, one can hardly doubt, extremely conservative in matters of what in those far-off days were known as "morals" (see, for example, García Márquez's *La Mala Hora/In Evil Hour*). If that is the case, then how is the film



going to present, evaluate, Susana herself? Obviously, by the "normal" standards widely held in the early 1950s, she is, whatever her pretexts or excuses, a flagrantly transgressive woman. Just as we know perfectly well what happens to gangsters, like Jimmy Cagney in *The Public Enemy* or Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, we also know what happens to "wicked" women: either they must die, like those male gangsters; or be deserted (like Scarlett O'Hara at the end of *Gone With The Wind*) by the men they really care for; or else (like Bette Davis at the end of *Jezebel* or Garbo at the end of *The Painted Veil*) must redeem themselves by doing something thought honorific by their society, such as nursing fever victims, no doubt in order to increase overpopulation in underdeveloped countries.

These are, roughly, the moral attitudes of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. But nowadays? Surely one comes up against the likelihood that a good many people today will respond to the film's material quite differently from—in fact incompatibly with—the way the "target-audience", as Buñuel can hardly have failed to know, would have responded in 1951? So differently, in fact, that attempting to decide what the film "really" means is like trying to decide whether a chessboard is a pattern of black squares on a white background or a pattern of white squares on a black background.

So antithetical are the historically possible ways of reading *Susana* that, were it not for the typographical problems involved, they could be arranged in parallel columns, like the antinomies in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. We may call one reading "MCM", after Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father, who thinks his newfound wealth has made him the victim of what he calls "Middle Class Morality." MCM tells us that Susana is a whore. The only reason she doesn't accept the steward's advances (whether she fancies him or not) is that, the moment

she invades the settled, thriving, middle-class world of the hacienda (ranch), she has craftily analyzed its power-structure, with a view to becoming, so to say, hen of the dunghill. The steward may be strong, handsome, *macho* and a power in his own realm, but he is merely a top servant, and Susana's ambition to climb out of her own class, such as it is (she is virtually an Unperson after two years in the reformatory), dictates that she should insinuate herself into the *family* structure. She has no advantages of intelligence or education—nothing save her body, her sexual charisma, and the low cunning which—so the MCM account might run—so often goes with it. Accordingly, she plays a few preliminary scales on the son, Alberto, before working up to a full-blown sonata on his father, who is "naturally" the real source of power in the household.

When she is brought in fainting out of the storm, both the father and the steward are at once attracted by the beauty of her body: the camera lingers on her contours, especially her exposed legs. The events that take place a couple of days later, when Susana has recovered from her ordeal, deserve to be recounted in some detail, as showing just how artful is her planning (from the MCM point of view) in playing on male susceptibilities. First, the mere sight of her causes Guadalupe (the father) to kiss his wife more passionately than, to judge from her response, he has for years. She responds to Jesús (the steward's) first attempts at seduction with a spitfire anger perfectly calculated to provoke him still further. She jokes about roosters and hens, and when he attempts to kiss her he crushes her to him and breaks some of the eggs she has been collecting, so that as she hoists her skirts to clean herself we see them running down her thighs (had there been a Mexican Hays office, this astonishing shot would certainly have been cut out!). She sashays off, leaving Jesús humiliated, and flirts

with Alberto (the son) through the bars of the downstairs window of his study-bedroom; when he starts responding she threatens to tell his mother. Later the same day we find her cleaning Guadalupe's gun cabinet, and as he enters the room she leans forward, having previously pulled down her dress to ensure that it is much lower-cut than Carmen (the mother) doubtless intended it to be. Guadalupe is both attracted and embarrassed, and tries, while cleaning and polishing one of his gun-barrels, to explain to her that she should dress more modestly—the peons ("hands") might try to molest her, he says. (She pretends not to understand.)

Feliz (the housekeeper) makes her a new dress, but not of such conventional decency that it too cannot be lowered when the situation requires. Susana takes Alberto his washed clothes, finds him rearranging his books and not wanting to be disturbed ("Go away—women don't understand such things!"); but she pouts, he apologizes, she asks him to "tutear" (use the intimate form of address, like "tu" in French or "Du" in German), climbs the library ladder to help and, just having been told to her chagrin that "Susana" stands for chastity, falls off, with her on top of him. Their prolonged kiss is interrupted by Carmen (who doesn't see Susana) calling in through the window; had she not arrived... Susana flaunts off again and Alberto sees her go into the barn with Jesús, who swears to "tame this filly." Guadalupe sends Alberto to fetch the steward, but all he finds when he has broken into the barn is an open back door. (It isn't clear to me whether we are to assume that Jesús has had his way with her or not.)

Thus the events of the third day (the second is omitted: we assume Susana is still recovering) clearly show her setting her cap quite unscrupulously at the two male family members and resisting the advances of a servant who cannot promote her fortunes. Carmen, an innocent, has taken her in as a daughter; Feliz, overflowing with folk-wisdom as well as superstition, sees through her at once and treats her with barely concealed hostility. One might suggest that this is because Feliz feels her own position as head of the female indoor servants to be under threat from this young and beautiful interloper. But this would be not only uncharitable but also simply wrong, since Feliz's skepticism and indeed hatred is founded on generations of sad experience of what unprincipled young hussies can do to men and the households over which they preside in accordance with the basic laws of nature. It's not only her timeless wisdom that tells her this; her religious faith—for she is a devout Christian—tells her that Susana must be The Temptress, Lilith, the Serpent of Old Eden, the impenitent Magdalene. Feliz, in fact, incarnates all the values of Home, Family, Religion and, in general, Middle Class Morality. It is only she whom Susana never takes in for a moment—even Carmen is initially bewitched by her.

This MCM reading, however, is not the only one I shall pursue through the remaining stages of Susana's brief career, after a few days of which she is, as I've said, on the point of breaking this settled and thriving community into a thousand pieces—for I imagine that the spectacle of a man turning his wife out in favour of a young mistress, especially in a country where divorce was unknown, and disowning his son for the same reason, might very well have been slightly more shocking in those days than it is now.

The other reading of *Susana*, which I shall now elaborate, is equal, opposite and alternative to the MCM account—and after all, the siren song of Senora Grundy without at least putting up a struggle. To help construct this other reading (which I'll call SUSANA—SUS for short) let's go back to the opening sequence of the film, where our heroine (as she will now become) escapes from the Reformatory.

Credit titles over a stormy night, torrential rain, thunder, STATE REFORMATORY on a grim wall, a shrieking girl being dragged by grim wardresses down a dark corridor and locked solitary in a punishment-cell. A vampire hangs from the ceiling, rats and a huge hairy spider crawl round the floor. Susana prays to the God Who made her as she is—doesn't she at least have the same rights as animals, as a scorpion? Praying that He will work a miracle (this is long ago and in another country), she tries to shake the window-bars, but they hold firm. Then a flash of lightning silhouettes the bars on the floor as a crucifix; she tries them again, they come away in her hand and, using them as a ladder, she climbs out, wriggles under the barbed wire fence, and flees into the howling storm. It's debatable whether the loosening of the bars is to be taken as a miracle and, if so, of what kind. It could hardly be a mere lucky coincidence, but we should remember that witchcraft has its miracles too; that, as we cut to the next sequence (the first at the hacienda), old Feliz is talking of thunder as the work of the Devil; that Guadalupe's mare's foal has been born dead; and that, just as Susana presses her ghastly face against the window-pane, a bolt of lightning shatters the family's best dinner service, probably a symbol of both its prosperity and its unity.

But before we run away with the conventional idea that unity is a good thing in itself, we might ask, What sort of unity is it? Carmen tells Alberto off for sitting down at table before his father; everything revolves around Guadalupe, El Jefe (the Boss), El Caudillo (the Führer). It is obvious that whatever unity the family may have is imposed from above, as in all the best patriarchies, and that the way to lead a comfortable and trouble-free life within it is to do what the wife, son and housekeeper have done—internalize it—accept it as a fact of nature. In fact, this family reproduces microcosmically the political structure of Mexico (as well as most other places) at the time—a structure which successive revolutions (like that of Zapata, for example) had been trying to overthrow since independence from Spain, but which bafflingly always seemed to re-assert itself when the revolutionary leader, drunk with power, himself became a new Caudillo (a situation nicely caught at the end of Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata*, made the year after *Susana*; and cf. Conrad's *Nostromo*). Of course, Guadalupe is no Porfirio Díaz or Guzmán Bento, but in his own very much smaller sphere he unthinkingly makes the same sorts of complacent, self-satisfied assumptions about where power naturally belongs, and his family go along with him in such mindless complicity that rebellion, or even the odd questioning thought, have become impossible for them.

Impossible, anyway, until Susana shows up, and proceeds to fan into flame—or merely, perhaps, uncover—the tensions, vicious rivalries and hatreds, that were presumably smoldering away all along. In this SUS reading, then, our heroine is merely the precipitator, the proximate cause, of the explosion that so quickly and, as it were inevitably, follows her arrival. For

this she can hardly be blamed, more especially since, when Carmen questions her about her past, Susana confusedly tells her that she lost her parents but then was taken in by a woman whose first husband was good to her but whose second tried to rape her. Of course we have no idea whether this is true or not, but the girl's behavior certainly suggests a traumatic past, and if she has been in a Reformatory for two years it probably hasn't been just for stealing tortillas. If she resorts to what might "normally" be considered dirty tricks to insinuate herself into this family, she is doing no more than to treat bourgeois society in the way she feels it has treated her. In fact, Susana plays something of the part in this little polity that a revolutionary would play on the larger political stage.

Take her behavior—still from the SUS point of view—on the fourth day she is on the hacienda—the day after the one recounted in detail above. Susana comes across Alberto hunting bugs (he is an entomologist) near a perhaps rather Freudian well and tries to distract him from his predatory male hobby but, wielding his butterfly-net, he seems to have forgotten their earlier moment of tenderness and to be more interested in insects than in her: just as his father has earlier been described by his mother as being more interested in horses than in women. So when Alberto sternly leaves, Susana pretends to fall into the well, and he has to rush back to climb down and help her, or perhaps I mean hunt her... after which it is only natural that they should enjoy a long kiss, in an embrasure in the well's side.

The steward Jesús comes by and, seeing the butterfly-net, becomes suspicious. Hearing him above, Alberto and Susana shrink further into the embrasure so that he won't see them and embrace even more closely. Jesús leaves, Alberto gives Susana a leg up out of the well and, herself an uncaught butterfly, she runs off laughing.

We cut to Susana by a pool getting dressed, presumably after bathing. Gunfire: Guadalupe is hunting too, but instead of using a butterfly net he is using that piece of symbolic patriarchal artillery, the rifle, and is killing not bugs but birds. Susana, dying to pursue the relationship they started in the gun-room, screams and pretends to have fallen and sprained her ankle so that he will come and help her. He needs little prompting to free her supposedly injured leg up to the thigh, and, picking up her handkerchief in the process, supports her back to the hacienda where his wife, seeing nothing but gallantry in the whole business, is all sympathy. Later that evening Guadalupe, alone in his room, buries his face in Susana's hanky, in a gesture combining his erotic longing with his male drive for mastery over everything and everyone, especially over such a very fair piece of Eve's flesh.

He looks out of his bedroom window and sees Susana silhouetted against her window, brushing her hair—Buñuel has an amazing ability to make the simplest and most everyday sights profoundly erotic. Susanna and the Elders, indeed!—see the story in the Apocrypha. At the same time, Susana's actions are being watched by Alberto and Jesús, both by now also completely smitten. The steward knocks at her door, forcibly kisses her and is forcibly thrust out, his hand in the process getting painfully caught in the door. "A bitch, but a thoroughbred" is his comment, confirming the family's habitual parallels between people and animals (if the latter are exploit-

ed or trapped or killed, why shouldn't the former be?). And he adds, apparently quite unable to grasp the fact that a woman might genuinely not like him, that he'll meet her next day "in the Carmelite ruins" (Buñuel seems to have about as much respect for religion as Susana does herself). Alberto, having seen this episode with Jesús, is dejected; his mother, clueless as ever about what is really going on (she has about the feminine intuition of a tortoise), tries to soothe him. Going to the marital bedroom, she comes across Susana's handkerchief, picked up earlier in the day by her husband, and questions him about it. He is evasive, and the sequence (and day) ends with his saying "Women!" and her saying "Men!"

But enough of SUS for the time being. Let's revert to MCM for some of the leading events of the next day. As dawn breaks, we find Alberto pursuing his veterinary skills in the farmyard, giving vitamin injections to the happy and productive sheep. When Jesús arrives at the Carmelite ruins, he finds Susana already there waiting for him since she obviously cannot resist anything in trousers. But having led him on by being there at all, she cries, when he tries to press his suit—flying in the face of decent Christian matrimony—"I don't belong to any man!" and screams when he tries to kiss her. Guadalupe arrives opportunely (?by pre-arrangement?) and sacks Jesús on the spot for molesting one of his servants, saying, as she bathes him in fulsome smiles, that he really must find her a safer job where men won't be able to interfere with her, not being intelligent enough to realize that it's Susana who has all along been interfering with them, including himself.

It is only when the devoted and dutiful wife Carmen finds that Jesús has been sacked that she begins to suspect her foster-daughter of laying deep and dark plots against her not very bright and perhaps rather susceptible husband, though she still doesn't suspect that anything could be going on between Susana and Alberto. The latter, having made a meager dinner (with Feliz hovering disapprovingly round—one might almost think the housekeeper more intelligent than her mistress!), goes to Susana's room and unlike Jesús obtains immediate entry. As poor deluded Guadalupe comes back from an excursion into town, his spurs jingling dejectedly, he stops longingly by Susana's window, but as he does so the light inside goes out, and he goes up to bed, only to be confronted by a wife objecting vehemently to his sacking of Jesús. She wants to know why, and during his halting explanation the name of Susana comes up, causing embarrassment on his part and righteous indignation on hers. Thus, the interloping minx has brought it about that a first-rate steward has been dismissed, the son and heir seduced, and a harmonious husband and wife have fallen out. Her fiendish plans are maturing with almost improbably astonishing speed, and we await the next day's events with breathless anticipation.

Nor are we at all disappointed. For—to revert to SUS—the patriarchy now exerts its full authoritarian power. The triumphant Susana, whom we first see smoking lazily in bed, no doubt filled with justifiable triumph over three males and the whole mini-community, needs first to cope with an attempt by Feliz and Carmen to degrade her by making her do menial tasks around the house and move her bedroom to the peons' sleeping-quarters (where she would certainly be raped). She does so by putting on a becoming show of reluctance when

Guadalupe asks why she is depressed and why she's scrubbing the floor; when he hears that his wife has so decreed, he has no hesitation in countermanding her orders, thus making it clear that, even though Carmen supposedly has absolute control over what goes on in her own domain, the house, the Boss will take it back if he feels that his interests are threatened: whatever power Carmen supposedly holds in her own right is merely a grace-and-favour loan from him. She sacks Susana; Guadalupe countermands that order too, and in front of other servants, thus publicly humiliating his wife. After dark, Jesús returns and is again rejected by Susana who "won't renounce what [she's] got," suggesting that she knows the Boss is now hers for the taking. And so it proves: he kisses her, Carmen sees and rushes back upstairs, while Susana, whom we see over Guadalupe's shoulder, smiles in final triumph. She has played her cards with a skill that would be the admiration of a seasoned diplomat, and can now afford to reject contemptuously Alberto's offer, later that evening, to take her away with him to Mexico City and set up house with her; she even pins *his* hand in the door, as she had previously done with Jesús'. The father quarrels with the son, the son with his mother, she with her husband... It says rather less than nothing for the apparently happy little community we met in the second sequence of the film that, within a few days, a mere slip of a girl, an utterly disempowered social outcast, has managed to expose the hollowness and indeed rottenness at its heart. The only way in which Carmen can finally defend her notion of bourgeois-Christian marriage is by taking a riding-whip—expropriating her husband's phallic power, as he had stripped her of her female authority—and, in a painful scene, thrashing Susana with a fixed grin of evil triumph on her face. The whole community is only saved from total disintegration—Guadalupe throwing out his wife and son and steward and doubtless Feliz too—by the fact that Jesús has now vindictively revealed Susana's whereabouts to the authorities, and the police drag her back to the hell of the Reformatory, like the devils dragging off Dr. Faustus at the end of Marlowe's play.

Of course, from the MCM point of view what counts is *not* the speed with which the community disintegrated. We all know about Original Sin and testosterone and what fools men make of themselves over a pretty thigh and the parts (as Mercutio says) that there adjacent lie. No, what matters is the speed with which, when the serpent has been ejected from Eden, fallen humans right themselves, the very next morning, and resume their previous social and moral—human—relations as if nothing whatever had happened, everyone falling on everyone else's neck in universal reconciliation. The ranch resumes its sunny, fertile life: cocks crow, geese cackle and goats bleat; even the sick mare starts prancing around like a frisky filly. Leonard Maltin characteristically calls this a "cop-out" on Buñuel's part, without considering whether the ending is not a tribute to the fundamental strength of the Nuclear Family and its power to survive the assaults of the Evil One: what happened was, in the words of wise old Feliz, "a nightmare—and that's God's truth."

But an awkward possibility that neither Maltin nor the MCM viewpoint considers, or perhaps can afford to consider, is that his ending may be a crowning and cutting irony, making, by the outrageous excessiveness of the characters' behav-

ior, the point that such families and communities can survive only by flatly refusing to see things as they really are. For, on any reading of *Susana*, the experience that the family and its associates have passed through has been so traumatic, so utterly subversive of its basic assumptions about life and about each other, that one might very well feel as if the only way of dealing with it was to sweep it under the moral carpet, and return to the make-believe world of Happy Families. Each member of the household has been unpardonably humiliated, not by Susana herself, but by all the other members of the household, Susana herself merely acting, as SUS suggested above, as a trigger.

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Thus, as I have been trying to show, we can construct two equal and opposite readings of *Susana*, each (I hope it will be conceded) with a good deal to be said for it. But a dilemma now arises. On the one hand, have these readings been artificially "constructed" by the promptings of, alternately, a Good Angel and an Evil Angel, as in Dr. *Faustus*? (Though which is Good and which Evil naturally depends on the assumptions that each viewer brings to the film.) If that is the case, then both readings are mere fakes, mind-games, and neither need be taken too seriously. On the other hand, isn't it at least possible that *both* readings are not "constructed" but somehow constitutive, innate, "of" the very essence of the film, and that there is no way of showing that one is plainly right and the other demonstrably wrong? In that case, of course, the very notion of a correct and an incorrect reading of this film, and perhaps of any film (or play or novel or anything), will have been severely jolted.

Here I have got myself into a dilemma, or set myself a paradox, as baffling, perhaps, as anything thought up by Zeno of Elia (Achilles and the Tortoise) or drawn by the modern Dutch artist M.C. Escher who, apparently adhering to the strictest laws of perspective and hydrodynamics, shows water flowing uphill to turn a water-wheel which, in turn, propels it backwards and upwards towards itself. So, my problem is: Does any work really have *a* meaning? Or is its supposed "Meaning" entirely dependent on the ideology, the mind-set, of whoever happens to be approaching it? If the latter is true, where (if anywhere) can any one of us be said to stand?—Anything s/he reads/sees will merely, and necessarily, confirm whatever s/he brought to it, and we are all flowing backwards uphill. The only consolation is that, like Sr. Guadalupe's family, we are all quite sure that we are who we are. Up to a point, anyway.

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Buñuel's *Susana* ends, as the reconstituted family retreats into the house and the French windows are shut firmly in our faces, with "FIN" [= THE END] superimposed on them. Perhaps it would have been truer to the film's bifocal vision if, instead, the last word had been "PRINCIPIO" [= THE BEGINNING].

CAVEAT

My readings of this film are based on a videotape recorded some fifteen years ago from SBS (Special Broadcasting Service—our Australian multicultural channel). It prided itself on transmitting movies complete, and I have no reason to suppose that anything was cut... but you never can tell.

Beautiful People

by **Robin Wood**

Jasmin Dizdar's *Beautiful People*, besides being a work of great achievement and among the most pleasurable experiences any film has given me over the past few years, offers a perfect bridge between the first two sections of this issue: it is essentially a screwball comedy (of a very unusual, original and provocative type) and a film that (at least in North America) vanished from our screens after only a brief run. It is currently available on both video and DVD; I have not seen the former but the DVD transfer, in the correct widescreen format, is excellent. Not, however, perfect: the end credits, in small print on black-and-white, are very hard to read even with the aid of strong magnifying glasses, and I must ask the reader's indulgence if, in what follows, I have misspelled some characters' names.

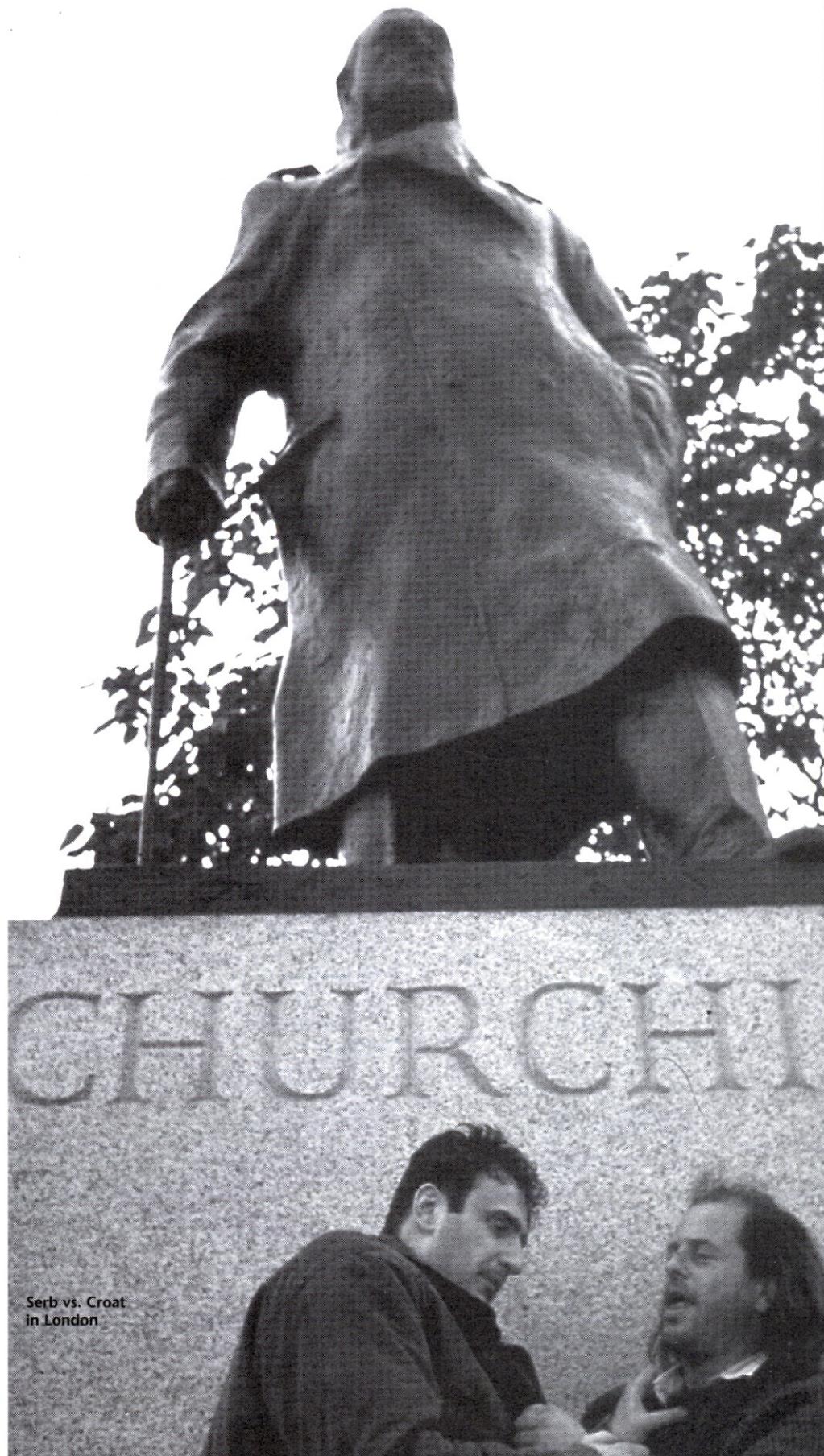
The brevity of the film's public exposure is not easy to account for. It arrived heralded by a prestigious award from the Cannes film festival—first prize in the 'Un Certain Regard' competition, for films by new directors—and it received very favourable press notices. Unfortunately, the critics' enthusiasm was not reflected in the prominence of their reviews. Perhaps because the film had no 'names' (not a single famous star to dangle images of before the public), or because it was clearly 'offbeat', not fitting comfortably into familiar categories, reviews were relegated to generally brief notices on inside pages. One would have hoped that any responsible newspaper would have given it a full page spread in the front of its reviews section, but editors (and perhaps the critics who write for them) seem to think it more important to denounce the latest Hollywood blockbuster than to cel-

eborate authentic achievements. After all, a \$100 million epic, however deplorable, is 'news', isn't it?

I find it hard to believe that this is Dizdar's first film. It evidences a genuine virtuosity far beyond that of all but a very few currently working English-language filmmakers. Doubtless he was served by an outstanding support team of cinematographers, editors and technicians, but the film overall, despite its almost bewilderingly complicated material (at least twenty identifiable and significant 'speaking' roles all cast with unknown, but uniformly faultless, actors mainly chosen because they share the national or ethnic background of their characters, multiple narrative lines intercrossing and interactive) is so assured and controlled that one must assume a single dominant vision in command. The control covers every aspect of filmmaking: writing, direction, work with actors (not a single less than perfect performance from the entire cast), editing ('vistuosic' is again the applicable word here). Perhaps the film's 'fault' (from the strictly commercial viewpoint) was that it makes too great demands on the audience. I must admit that on first viewing, although my love for the film was immediate and instinctive, I became somewhat at sea during its first half hour, where one is asked to be able to recognize a dozen or more major characters (all with unfamiliar faces) from their often very brief first appearances. For North American audiences the problem is compounded by the film's variety of British accents: its project entails the representation of the entire British class structure. I don't know if it had greater commercial success in Britain or (subtitled) on the European

continent. On DVD in the privacy of one's home, of course, such a problem need not exist: at risk of disturbing the film's momentum (breathless and non-stop, giving the film its authentically 'screwball' feeling), one can pause for reflection, go back a chapter and repeat. But on second viewing everything is clear, the characters are already one's old friends (or, in a very few cases, enemies). For myself, the clincher on first viewing was the startling narrative 'leap into the void' about a third of the way through, audacious beyond the point of recklessness, barely plausible in 'realist' terms (but this is barely a realist film for all the immediacy of its brilliantly etched characterizations), but it works. Someone who combined the nerve to imagine that with the ability to bring it off with such total aplomb had certainly earned one's full attention.

At this point I must issue a warning. When I got the idea of an issue devoted to films that had somehow slipped through the net I had not considered a major snag inherent in the project. The whole idea was to get readers to see films they might have ignored or had never even heard of, but one cannot write seriously about a film without giving away its surprises, shocks and pleasures: one writes, in other words, for readers who have already seen the film under discussion. If you have not yet discovered *Beautiful People*, you may wish to postpone reading the later part of this article until after you have checked it out. Not that knowing could spoil the film, but



there is a special kind of pleasure in discovering something unknown which is different from the pleasure of revisiting it or watching it with prior knowledge (one reason why I seldom read 'reviews' beyond the first paragraph). I shall just say for now that the narrative leap (characteristically of the film, but its extreme instance) manages to be at once funny and horrifying.

The application of the term 'screwball comedy' might seem questionable: this is, after all, although set mainly in London, a film firmly centred on the Bosnian war, and its horrors are by no means neglected or trivialized. Yet it has many of the markings of screwball comedy, even though its 'love at first sight' romance moving towards the traditional 'construction of the couple' near the end belongs more to the 'romantic' variety. It has the frantic pace of screwball, established at the very beginning in the opening credit sequence, is frequently very funny, and uses the freedoms that screwball permits to define its tone and how we are to read it: its 'realistic' characters are also very clearly recognizable *types*, though given vivid individual life; the various narratives and their complicated intertwinings are sufficiently stylized to establish that what we are offered is not a 'slice of life' but an intricate construct, a constantly shifting kaleidoscope in which realist plausibility takes second place to the construction of meaning. Its utopian ending also belongs to the world of screwball, though the utopianism is qualified by a whole range of more or less subtle disturbances.

The film's essential theme is stated concisely during the opening credits: the London bus becomes a microcosm of an embryonic multi-racial community: we see passengers of all colours and races sitting together peaceably, not necessarily loving each other, never quite trying to engage each other in conversation (the first step to mutual understanding and acceptance), but co-existing without disturbance. The disturbance erupts in the abrupt outbreak of physical violence between two apparently long-time enemies from opposite sides of the Bosnian conflict, one Serb, one Croat (we learn subsequently that they were neighbours, in the same village). The sequence is staged and played as comedy but the violence is very real (both end up in hospital), the entire bus is disrupted, the multi-cultural society falls apart in disarray, the combatants fall off and continue their chase and fisticuffs through the streets, the whole accompanied by boisterous folk-style (Bosnian?) dance music and frantic editing: the fighters, bystanders, people filming with video cameras, a statue looking on with seeming displeasure, Big Ben, trees... The energy, the creative exhilaration, do not obliterate the potential seriousness of what we are being shown.

The credits end with a black screen and the title: the single word 'People' (appearing at first almost like a sarcastic comment on what we have seen), above which 'Beautiful' gradually manifests itself. It appears at first purely ironic: the combatants and their disruptive personal war strike us as the reverse of beautiful. Yet the humorous tone suggests an affection for them despite their behaviour, and the film that follows makes the exact nuance of the title clear: not only that beauty is in 'the eye of the beholder' (the overwhelming feeling the film conveys is of an almost all-embracing generosity), but also that, although people may not *be* beautiful and certainly can behave very unbeautifully, they have the capacity to *become*

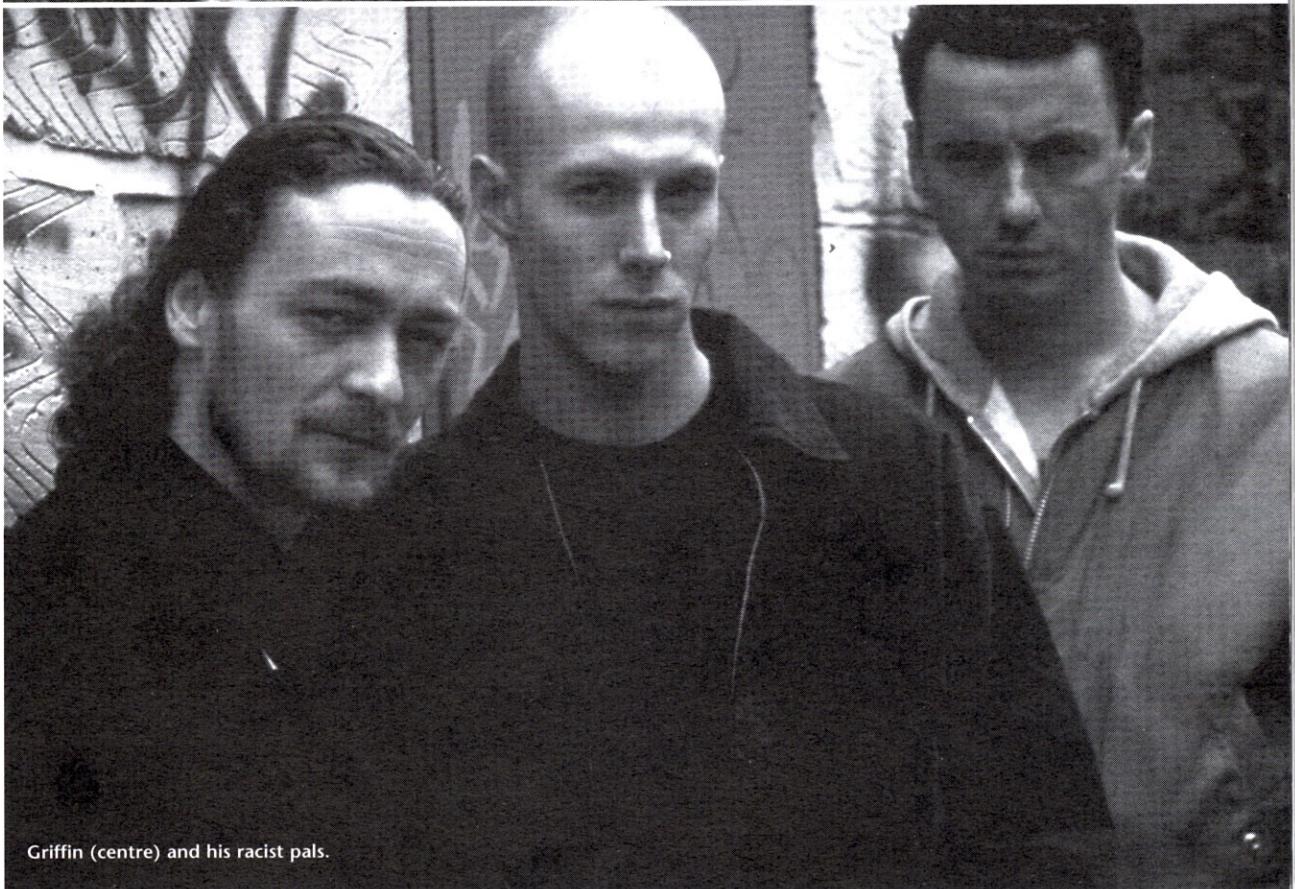
beautiful with a little prompting and a few lessons. The film celebrates the *possibility* of a harmonious multi-cultural society whilst acknowledging very firmly the difficulties in the way of its formation, all of this contained (just) within the dominant mode of comedy. The enemy, inevitably, is defined as nationalism in all its ugly and destructive forms.

I should say here that perhaps the reason I love this film so much is that Dizdar's socio-political position and his general mindset, his creative personality, seem to me very close to my own. Marxists used to describe me as an 'unreconstructed humanist'. I am still a humanist, I think, but perhaps I can claim to be sufficiently reconstructed as to call myself a socialist/feminist/antinationalist/antiracist humanist. Like Dizdar (I think) I respect people's right (including my own) to continue to accept whatever in their own cultural heritage sustains them without harming others. I have not the slightest inclination to reject Mozart, Schubert, Stravinsky, Bach, Mahler and Nielsen because they are all Dead White Males (I could easily substitute a list of writers, thinkers, artists, filmmakers, but music has always been of very particular importance to me). They are, for better or worse, integral to my very existence and the air I breathe, they are my 'nationalism'. My son is sustained by various rock groups, and, although I have not been able to progress very far beyond Marianne Faithful and Cowboy Junkies, I respect that. My own concession to 'nationalism' is simply my allegiance to the tradition to which I belong, which I could not reject without seriously damaging and impoverishing myself. I believe it to be a very rich tradition and I love to share it with others, but I hope I have learnt not to assert that it is 'better' than theirs (even at times when in my heart I believe it is—I have to be honest here!). Equally I believe I have the right to object when people tell me (or at least imply) that they have the right to assert that my commitment to the work of certain Dead White Males makes me by definition a racist. It is at the point when you feel that you have such rights that nationalism becomes an evil, and divisive. Central to *Beautiful People* is its analysis of that point.

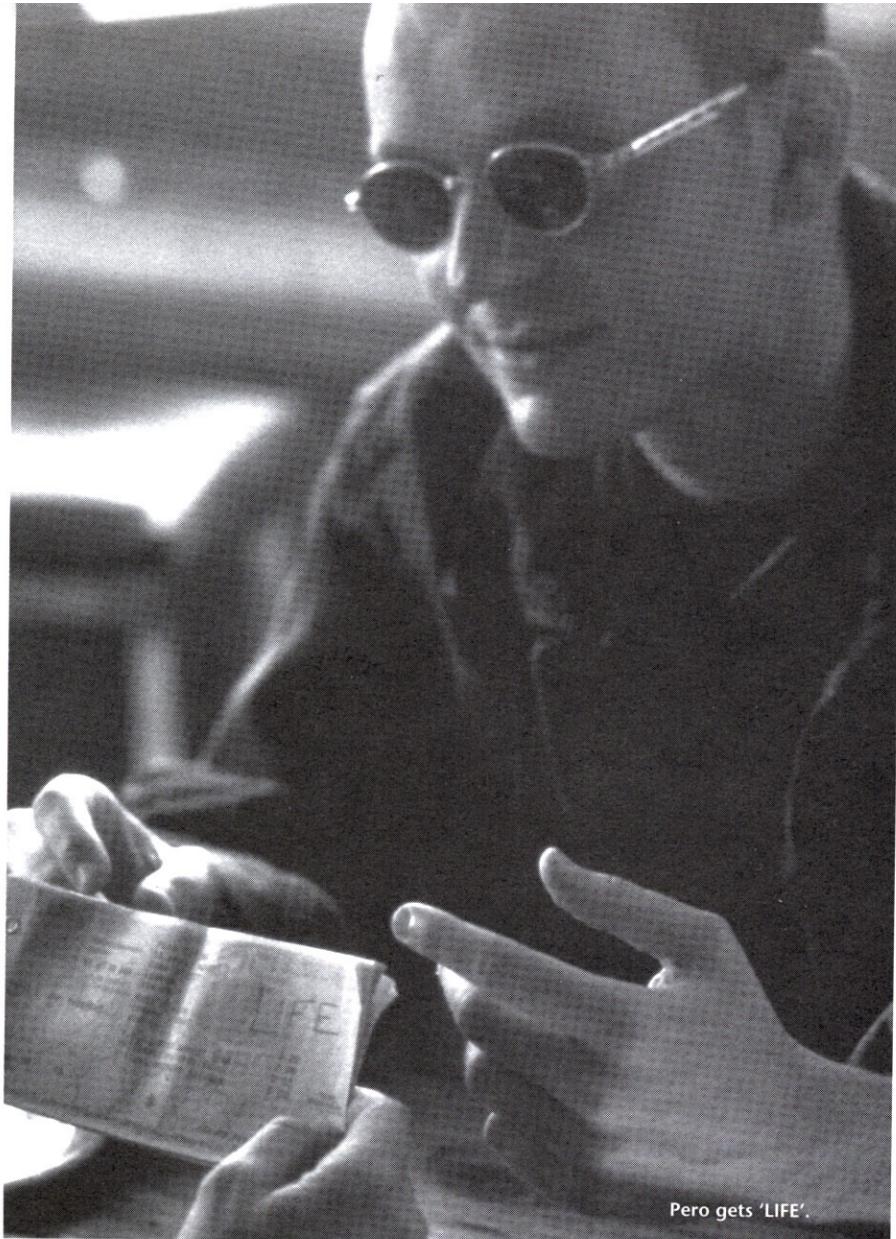
It will be clear that I am using the term 'nationalism' in a sense that goes far beyond the question of nationality (I think Dizdar would approve). If you need a precedent, see George Orwell's 'Notes on Nationalism', among his finest essays. In this sense I regard religious belief (for example—I choose it partly because it is the one major form of 'nationalism' that Dizdar evades, perhaps wisely as it might fatally undermine the dominant mode of comedy) as a form (or extension) of nationalism. My personal belief is that organized religions (and some more than others) have been responsible for a very great deal of the human misery that exists in the world. Just consider all the wars through the ages that have used them either as bases or pretexts, not to mention the persecutions and the manifold forms of oppression. One thinks immediately, of course, of the current Israeli/Palestinian conflicts (or, for that matter, of Northern Ireland). I would have thought that any god who authorized you to kill other human beings over some disputed patch of 'holy ground' instantly disqualified himself—it always seems to be a 'him'—from serious consideration. And on what are these religions based, rationally speaking, beyond sets of superstitions inscribed in texts produced thousands of years ago within cultural situations totally def-



Dr. Mouldy and his sons.



Griffin (centre) and his racist pals.



Pero gets 'LIFE'.



The café: Pero (right) and the racists.

ferent from our own? I think it would be wonderful if all organized religions suddenly ceased to exist, replaced with that generalized, non-specific, non-doctrinaire, all-embracing sense of wonder and reverence before the mysteries of life and the universe that I think of as 'religious experience'. But I do not wish to deprive any individual of her/his specific religious belief, so long as it remains personal and refrains from trespassing on the freedom and rights of others. If you believe that your god doesn't want you to eat certain foods, perform certain acts of sexual intercourse, or have abortions, then don't do those things. And you also have the right to explain to others why you don't do them. You do not, however, have the right to coerce, prosecute or in any way bully others (including those closest to you, your own children for example) into following you in your beliefs. I would define the acceptable form of 'nationalism' as self-definition: oppressed peoples (those threatened, for example, with 'ethnic cleansing' or, like Canada or, today, most of the universe, seriously threatened by cultural imperialism) need a form of nationalism in its narrower sense, but in dominant cultures it automatically becomes an evil, a form of oppression. In our personal lives as with nations, it becomes an evil as soon as it goes beyond self-definition. It is only when such matters are agreed (extended of course to all forms of 'nationalism', or should we say simply allegiances?) that the truly harmonious multi-cultural society could come into being.

I don't think this little sermon takes us far away from Dizdar's film. Its one danger is that it might be taken as suggesting that the film is itself a sermon. If it is, it is a sermon very unlike any I heard during my teenage phase of hysterical Christianity, a sermon that fills us with laughter, warmth and the spirit of generosity, and acceptance of all those who can accept.

In so far as I am writing for those who have not yet seen the film, it seems to me that my best course is to limit myself to its first half hour, simply offering a guide to the multiple narratives and the many characters, together with some hints about their interactions: a sort of narrative map, to facilitate access. If, after this, I feel tempted to write about subsequent developments you may prefer not to know about, I shall warn you, marking the place with a row of asterisks.

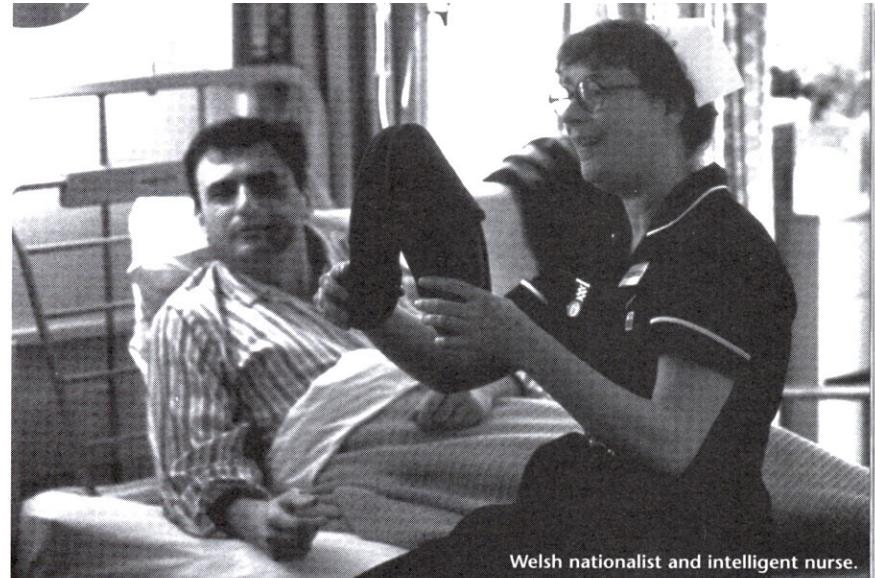
The film proceeds with three breakfasts. After the succinct statement of the credit sequence we are shifted abruptly from the violence and hectic energy of the chase/fight to the perfect calm (read stagnation) of a British upper-class break-

fast. These are the Thorntons, the first of the film's four British families representing different aspects or strata of the British class system, and the only one that it satirizes mercilessly. Father and son are both engrossed in newspapers, the mother is reading a novel. Even here, however, of the three family members initially introduced, the mother is the least under attack, too pathetic in her conciliatory manner to be quite contemptible (she makes a feeble, totally ineffectual, attempt to assert a qualification to the men's staunchly Tory conversation). The 'news' (reported by the 'chinless wonder' son, more right wing even than his statesman father) is either mildly amusing (the Queen Mother has choked on a fishbone) or decidedly life-enhancing (praise for the father's latest speech). Then the daughter Portia ('a Daniel come to judgement?') appears, establishing her general contempt for her family with brief caustic comments before she leaves for the work she doesn't have to do but which registers her protest against the familial ethos and the place of women within it. If one of the film's projects is the construction of the multi-cultural society, another (closely related) is its redefinition of the notion of 'family'.

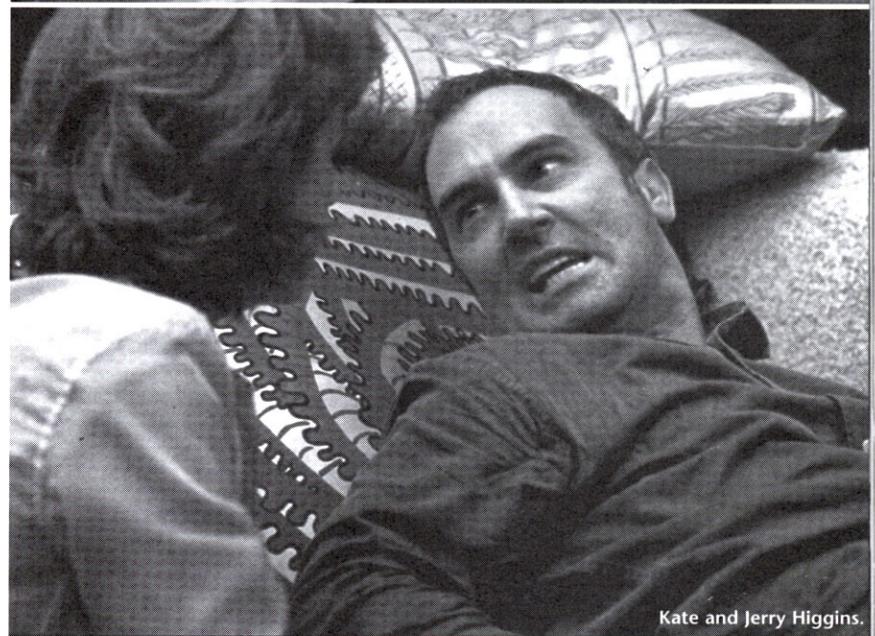
Cut at once to the second family, a broken one, upper middle class: chaos (a word that will take on further, and very touching, overtones much later in the film, and within the same-but-different familial context). Two young boys are engaging in a violent pillow fight; their father has burnt the toast; their mother has moved out. The father is Dr. Mouldy, whose progress through the film will represent, exactly, the casting off of the 'mould' of traditional family life, with all its insularities and defences against the outside world, and become a central factor in the film's redefinition of 'family'.

Cut abruptly to the film's lower-middle-class family: first the son, Griffin, a near skinhead with a nose stud, and his two pals (who appear to be in hiding—all three, it later transpires, are heavily into heroin). They are also rampant racists, determined to keep Britain 'clean' (a marvellous irony), the film's most extreme nationalists aside from the two initial (quasi-symbolic) combatants, though Griffin, from the start, is defined by the actor's performance as a sort of hanger-on, not entirely convinced, a young man totally alienated from his family, hence succumbing easily to peer pressure, the need to 'belong', to have a 'nationalism' of whatever kind. They are planning on flying to Holland to support 'England' against the Netherlands in a football match. Griffin's mother arrives at the door, asking him to sign a card for his father's 50th birthday. The breakfast scene that follows again privileges the helpless but subtly subversive mother over the dismissive father: she can see, as he cannot, that their son is not irredeemable. Griffin will turn out to be one of the film's major (if inadvertent) heroes.

There follows a brief coda. Not all the film's



Welsh nationalist and intelligent nurse.



Kate and Jerry Higgins.



Kate and Jerry Higgins.

major, or crucial, characters have been introduced at this point, but its dominant concerns have been. The links between the various sets of characters now begin. Griffin, it transpires, is Dr. Mouldy's next door neighbour. The two rowdy boys are in the street, still shouting 'Mighty Ducks!' The most virulently racist of Griffin's pals informs them that they are English (not British!)—'Never forget that'—and slaps the head of the elder.

A block of council flats. A young white man wearing dark glasses emerges on the balcony, walks past a young black girl from the next flat, who is singing as she prepares vegetables (I can't quite make out what they are, but probably from her ethnic basis), and greets her cordially. She is happy, beautiful and at peace with herself, troubling no one. She will not become involved in the film's action, yet she will return, unexpectedly and crucially, a little before its conclusion, producing one of the blots on the surface utopianism. He is (we subsequently learn) Pero Guzino, from Bosnia, and he is gradually developed as one of the film's most lovable and charming characters. We follow him on his jaunty progress to an immigration office where he is presented with a paper which will entitle him to claim his 'Giro' by an official of foreign (Indian? Pakistani? Middle Eastern? Does it matter?) descent, who is very sympathetic and instills in Pero that the 'Giro' means (among a great many other things, such as money and work) 'LIFE', a word he writes for him across the card. We share Pero's pleasure in walking along a London street (unlovely but liberating—the qualification is important, definitive of Dizdar's complex attitude to Britain), then getting a set of photos from a machine (his new identity, his pride and pleasure understood but not glamourized). He then enters a cafe, and sits down at a table (the only obvious free space) with Griffin and his racist cohorts. Pero is listening to his ethnic music, and wants to share it with these nice, presumably welcoming British people, so he hands the headphones across to the chief racist with a lovely friendly smile, asking him to explain 'LIFE' on his paper. The response: 'Why don't you go back where you came from?' Further incidents in the cafe and beyond (involving a somewhat 'superior' woman who leaves her purse behind, and thinks the inarticulate-in-English Pero is pursuing her when he follows her into the street to return it) get Pero into hospital, where he will meet Portia Thornton, now revealed as a trainee doctor, when, asked what he wants to eat, he can only reply, 'Your phone number...' Her encouraging smile (his sheer pleasure in existence gives him instant charm) prompts him to follow this with 'Do you have a boyfriend?' Cut to Portia's mother and brother watching father on TV. He is delivering a speech on immigration ('We must tighten our immigration policy...') and characterizes immigrants as 'layabouts'—although 'compassion' is also essential (as an afterthought). Pero (out of work, on welfare, subsisting in a bare one-room council apartment, certainly qualifies for the description.

One final major character (and another near-shattered family) is now introduced: a panicky, near-hysterical Scotsman preparing for travel called Jerry Higgins. He is going to Bosnia with a U.N. mission because he can't bear pain, and feels guilty because other people in the world are suffering

and he isn't. His artist wife Kate argues; his child is watching a TV programme about a pursued animal that will ultimately 'collapse and be eaten alive'. Every detail in this extraordinary film has meaning and resonance, is not just there for 'atmosphere' or 'realism'. The man grabs passport, keys. He and his wife leave their daughter at the school (populated mostly by black children) where Griffin's repressive and punishing father is on yard duty and where Dr. Mouldy is also leaving his two disturbed and violent sons...

It is worth mentioning here a tiny, almost irrelevant incident (it has no sequel in the narrative, and is almost thrown away), as further evidence of the film's stylization, its very conscious patterning, whereby as many connections as possible are made among its characters, some important, some (like this) quite trivial. Kate Higgins, after Jerry's departure, sits huddled miserably in the cafe in which Pero had his confrontation with Griffin and his racist cronies. Something on the floor beside her table catches her attention and she casually picks it up. It is Pero's strip of photos, which he dropped. It means nothing to her (though she half-responds to his nice smile) and the two characters will never meet (although, in the film's most astonishing sequence, her husband's path will cross with Griffin's). The link is for the audience: the wife of the man who has gone to Bosnia to save lives, the recent Bosnian immigrant. One way of looking at the film's structure might be to see it as a complicated game of 'six degrees of separation'—but its sense of play never detracts from its essential seriousness. The cafe is in fact the one location where all four of the film's structuring narratives cross paths—the Pero narrative, the Griffin narrative, the Higgins narrative, the Mouldy narrative: we may or may not, much later in the film (I didn't until the third viewing) recognize Dr. Mouldy's wife, when she is at last identified, as the 'superior' woman who mistakes Pero's friendly smile for a sexual advance, a misreading that indirectly causes the accident that lands him in the hospital where he meets Portia (and in which the two combatants from the credit sequence share a room with a Welsh nationalist...).

There is, however, a fifth (embryonic) family to be introduced, almost exactly a half hour into the film, the last major component of its mosaic of interactive characters: in the hospital, Dr. Mouldy is confronted by a young Bosnian refugee couple called Herbigovich, the woman pregnant and close to the time of delivery. The kind but totally exhausted and distraught doctor goes through the usual platitudes as if by rote, half asleep, then is abruptly brought awake as the young husband's demand penetrates his consciousness: 'Kill baby.' It is the film's first devastating moment, the first of several.

This ends the exposition of a work that might be discussed in terms of a vast symphonic movement in the traditional three sections: development and recapitulation/finale follow.

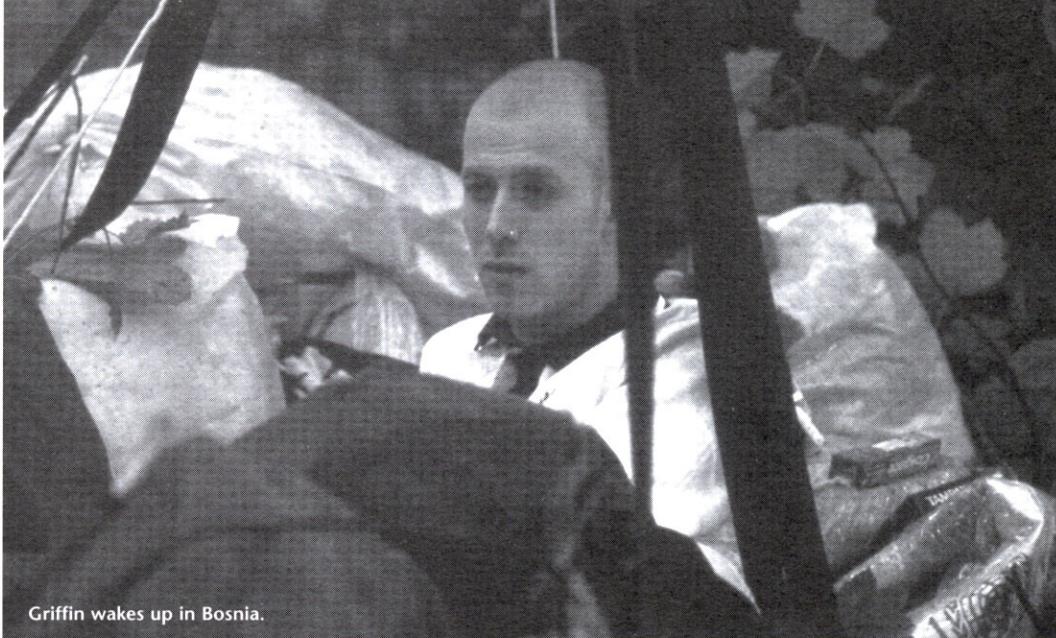
* * * * *

As what follows is written for those who have seen the film, I can feel free to abandon sequential description and concentrate on a few 'key' scenes, especially those involving Griffin, Pero and Portia, and the young Bosnian couple; in the interests of clarity I

shall continue to employ fairly detailed description, to make the scenes present to the memory. I shall then examine the ending and its qualified utopianism.

The Griffin narrative It is among the film's triumphant ironies that Griffin—a 'layabout' indeed, potential heroin addict, reluctant racist, among the film's lowest of the low—should be central to what I have called its 'leap into the void' (essentially Griffin's leap, though he is unconscious at the time) and will emerge as its most positive hero: the abrupt, shocking and totally unexpected leap into Bosnia. What happens: prior to their flight to Holland, the three cronies are in a pub; a brawl erupts; Griffin exits into the men's room, where he finds his completely obnoxious leader unconscious, a hyperdermic still stuck in his arm; he promptly (in his habitual follow-the-leader manner) shoots up himself. The third, tallest member, 'Bigsy', has to extricate them (in a rush—they are about to be attacked), wake them up, get them to the airport, where Griffin and the leader sleep, one on each of his shoulders. Take-off time. 'Bigsy' drags his mates to the runway, but Griffin, barely conscious, wanders off in the wrong direction, collapses on a pile of luggage, and pulls a tarpaulin over himself. The 'luggage', in fact a U.N. airlift of supplies to Bosnia, plus the undiscovered and still unconscious Griffin, is loaded on to a 'wrong' plane, and to the strains of a 'pop' song ('Sail Away...') Griffin sails down from the sky into the middle of disputed territory.

I cannot think of many contemporary filmmakers who would have the audacity (a) even to *think* of such a narrative development and its continuation, even fewer who would (b) go ahead and do it, and almost none (c) capable of bringing it off triumphantly, with a seemingly infallible judgement of tone, so that all the potential objections (implausibility, 'taste'...) simply never arise. Griffin awakes



Griffin wakes up in Bosnia.



The locals collect supplies.



Griffin flees the bombardment.



Griffin in the field hospital.



Leg amputation: Jerry Higgins and Griffin.

to find himself on top of a pile of humanitarian supplies; a small boy tries to communicate with him; local people come to collect what they need or can use, a young woman (perhaps the boy's mother?) prominent among them. A bombardment begins, the woman is killed, there are corpses, blood, suffering. Griffin, totally bewildered (does he think he's still in England? In Holland??), staggers across a field into a convoy of U.N. lorries (where he encounters Jerry Higgins), and is taken to a field hospital where an injured Bosnian is about to have his leg amputated without anaesthetic (we are spared nothing of horrific detail). Still understanding nothing except basic human agony, Griffin is appalled ('You can't *do* that!). He then remembers that he has one last heroin 'fix' in his pocket, and hands it over, to spare the 'foreigner' pain and perhaps save his life. The moment is central to the complexity of the film's tone, and to its meaning. For a start, it is intercut with the sequence in which, back home in England, Griffin's parents discover a packet of heroin under his bed, the father promptly dismissing his son as a hopelessly lost soul who will be dead within months, and dogmatically rejecting the mother's suggestion that it's difficult growing up in the present age—Griffin can be seen only as throwback to other genes, the parents coming from a (supposedly genetic!) tradition of moral uprightness. Tone: the horror, the pain of the Bosnia sequences are given their full weight, yet, against all probability, the sequence is also extremely funny, simply because we simultaneously perceive its absurdity, its multiple connotations (Griffin's past, his situation in Bosnia, his bewilderment, the totally unexpected and incongruous use of a dangerous drug as an anaesthetic, the business back home with his parents). We are never invited to laugh at the horror: the film has no place for 'gross-out' humour or for even the least shade of campiness. Meaning: the challenge: the notion that the 'nationalist' chains and weapons with which we insulate ourselves and harm each other *can* be broken if we can only be forced to acknowledge our basic common humanity, through empathy with others on the most fundamental level of pain. The theme will receive another statement, another variation, in the story of Dr. Mouldy and the

young Bosnian couple who wish to have their baby killed. This is a film (as perhaps I have already managed to suggest) which is not merely an engrossing narrative, a 'screwball comedy', a love story, a social/political statement, but an intricately worked construct in which everything relates to everything. In other words, a major work of art, but also a powerfully political one.

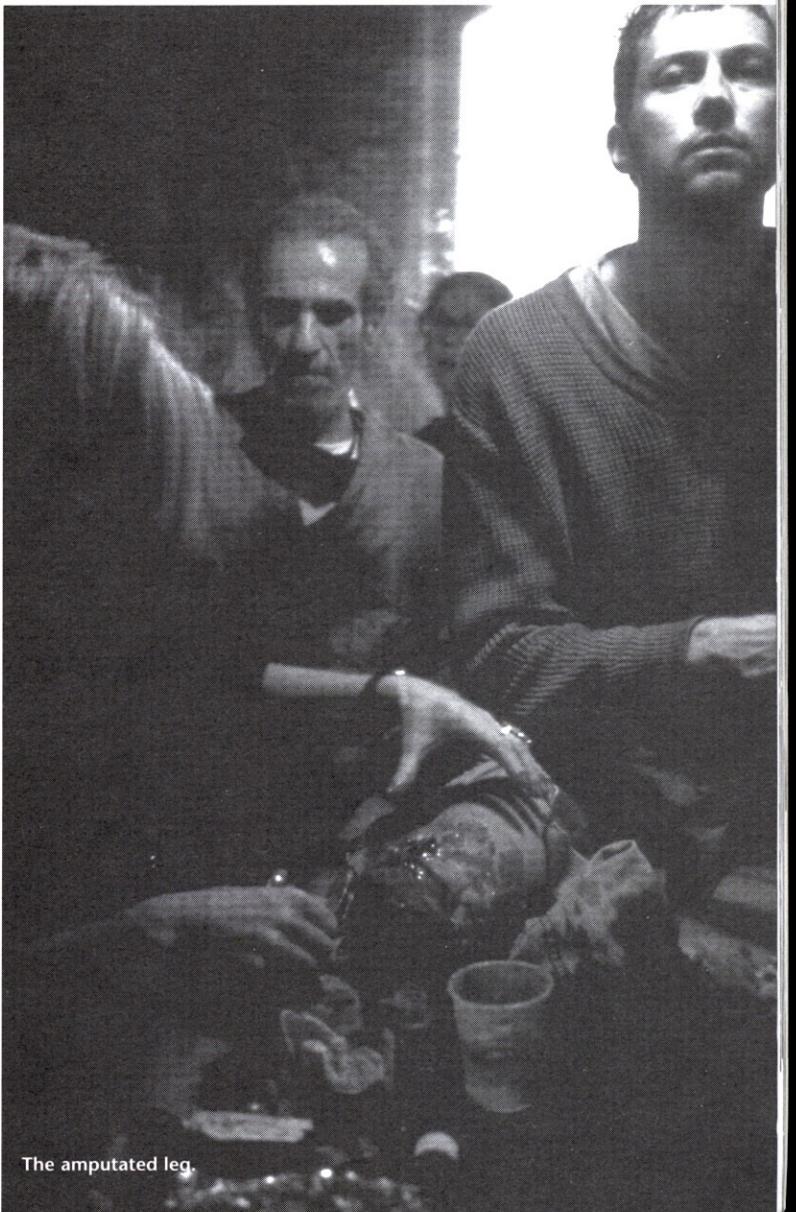
(It is the amputated leg that connects Griffin and Jerry Higgins: the latter discovers it dumped outside on a heap and has just taken possession of it, as an emblem of his obsessive identification with suffering, when his own leg is slightly injured by a stray bullet. Returned to England, he becomes fixated on the notion that his own leg must be amputated, without anaesthetic, a psychological problem subsequently diagnosed by a woman doctor as 'Bosnia syndrome'. His demands rejected by the hospital, he is reduced to sleeping on a railway track, his leg carefully placed over the rail. We can't but notice, however, that he has chosen an abandoned piece of track, overgrown with grasses and weeds...)

The amputation scene has an immediate sequel: Griffin goes on to discover the small boy he first saw when he awoke, now blinded in the explosions (and presumably orphaned), and the would-be English nationalist who earlier participated (albeit half-heartedly) in the beating-up of a London black, immediately empathizes with him, as a poignant reflection of his own sense of helplessness and bewilderment—the child he will take home, and which will become the transformative link between his own redemption, the redemption of his parents (and of his relationship with them), and finally the redemption (in the utopian finale) of his fellow racists. I suppose there will be cynics who will dismiss the use of a helpless (and now blind) child as the medium through whom issues are resolved and the corrupted humanity of adults is restored as sentimental ('Dickensian', perhaps?). I think Dizdar's purpose here is to make us *want* to believe in it, as a first and necessary step: if human beings are to learn to live together in harmony and acceptance, then cynicism is one of the first obstacles that needs to be undermined. Allow me to repeat a point already insisted upon: for all the film's realistic detail this is not a 'realist' text, we are not concerned here with *Ladri di bicicletti* or with *Roma, citta aperta*, films which systematically attempt to conceal their manipulations as an integral aspect of their project.

The Dr. Mouldy/Herbigovich narrative The reasoning behind 'Kill baby' is quickly revealed: the young wife's pregnancy is the result of gang-rape by an unspecified number of enemy soldiers. The scenes of the husband's demand and its aftermath are perhaps the only ones in the film completely free of satirical overtones. The episode parallels Griffin's redemption through the Bosnian boy, and, similarly, might sound on paper 'corny', 'sentimental', etc.. I don't think such a reaction would occur to anyone watching Dizdar's film, because of the total conviction with which it is realized: less committed filmmakers would have treated it 'tactfully', 'tastefully', 'delicately', etc.. Dizdar's passionate engagement sweeps aside such inhibitions. Earlier, the mother has tacitly accepted her husband's judgement; she has one brief scene alone when she strokes her belly, feels her baby move, and (as if against her will) smiles. The crucial scene takes perhaps two minutes of screen time. The baby has just been delivered; we don't see what the husband has tried to do, but Dr. Mouldy has to overpower him, hold him down by force, pressing him to a

table, shouting 'The *mother* chooses! The *mother* chooses!'. We see the mother, just up from her bed, stagger across to look at her (offscreen) child; a near-ecstatic smile spreads across her exhausted face. The husband appears beside her, looks down, and smiles with her. The questions of how the child was conceived and who is the father abruptly melt away into irrelevancy: there is simply a new, vulnerable and helpless, human being. If you reject that scene then you can't possibly understand the film.

Its sequel, if emotionally less devastating, is scarcely less audacious: the doctor, his own family in ruins, adopts the Bosnians, and the result is the film's only genuinely happy family. It is introduced by a sequence that matches Pero's walk through the streets with his 'Giro'. Dr. Mouldy has to work; he gives the couple his address and sends them home by taxi from the hospital. Their drive through London is accompanied by a familiar patriotic theme from one of Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' marches (not 'Land of Hope and Glory' but the *other* famous one); the couple are understandably blissful in their sense of newfound freedom and safety, accepted into a 'good community', and look out of the window at the sights of London: dingy streets, ugly buildings, poverty everywhere, beggars, the homeless... The precision of the balance between irony



The amputated leg.

and not-irony is characteristic of the film, which offers its 'beautiful people' no guarantees and defines London as a place safe perhaps from ethnic cleansing but not exactly a demi-paradise. Subsequently, we are given the formation and celebration of the film's 'ideal family': a doctor who thought he had lost everything, his two young sons as occasional visitors, his adoptive (and clearly temporary) son-and-daughter couple, their baby the product of a gang rape. No one quarrels, no one oppresses anyone, everyone is happy. What is the baby's name? 'Kaos'. Dr. Mouldy fully appreciates the humour of it, joyfully accepting chaos as a lifestyle, learning and participating in their celebratory ethnic dance. Has anyone, as things stand, the right to ask for more? seems to be the tone.

The Pero/Portia narrative, and the ending One might complain (were one in the mood) that the Pero-Portia love story is a bit perfunctory, building too easily upon convention (unlike the other major narratives): love at first sight, the absence of the kinds of tension and obstacles present in the other narratives, leading to marriage without apparent problems. I think the actors carry it sufficiently, and, by linking the daughter of a 'distinguished' cabinet minister to another lowest of the low, an immigrant 'layabout', it provides a magnificent wedding celebration scene (echoing, in a very different key, the family celebration of Dr. Mouldy and the Herbigoviches).

The wedding celebration is preceded by the scene where Pero (whose charm is centred in his sureness of himself and his total ignorance of what well-bred people call 'decorum' and who consequently has not the slightest qualms about presenting himself to the woman he loves as he is, without pretension or concealment) takes Portia 'home' to his barren one-room council apartment, with the bed that collapses when they collapse on it. Afterwards Portia, on the balcony, sees the young black woman, Pero's neighbour (about whom he was earlier questioned by the immigration authorities and maintained a nervous ignorance) being taken away by the police, Pero hanging back, very disturbed: although he has (provisional?) immigrant status, he has no confidence in such matters. Why do Portia's parents accept him? I don't think there is a problem there: they have already had to accept her as their daughter (can a politician risk a scandal?), and she has shown from the opening not only that her mind is her own but that it conflicts head on with theirs. And she is, from the outset, intelligent: she is not simply choosing an inappropriate mate as an act of rebellion. There really isn't much they could do...

The wedding reception returns us to the family with which the film (almost) opened: the dominant family of British culture, upper class and governing. Speeches:

1. The mother, who tells us she is not the speechmaker of the family;
2. The cabinet minister father, who introduces Pero, with a very precisely judged sense of pride (Aren't we liberal, even if we're 'conservative'?) and deprecation (a foreigner, an immigrant).
3. Pero—who, abruptly and devastatingly, tells his auditors (and us) that he too (under orders) has killed women and children, and is now happy to be out of that situation. Another of the films devastating moments (but how many are there?)—followed by his reaching into his pocket to extract something, and the instant panic of his right-wing, racist brother-in-law ('A

gun!!!'). It is, in fact, his 'Giro', proof of his legal status, and of 'LIFE', which he wants to show to the now panic-stricken assembly, shouting that he is now 'one of you'..

Looking back from this point, the structure of this apparently chaotic film, with its abrupt leaps from scene to scene, character to character, event to event, country to country—its 'symphonic' form of exposition/development/recapitulation—becomes clear:

Exposition London; the four British families; their inner tensions, making their unity precarious (or, in the case of Dr. Mouldy, already shattered).

Development (marked very emphatically by Griffin's impromptu flight): (i) Bosnia; the families dispersed (Griffin and Higgins in Bosnia, Portia conducting an affair with a wildly 'inappropriate' lover, Mouldy separated from his sons as well as from his wife). (ii) The movement toward redemption, healing, reconstruction: Griffin and the boy, Mouldy and the Bosnian couple, Portia and Pero forming a new couple, Higgins developing his obsession beyond the point of absurdity.

Recapitulation (marked by four celebrations): The families reunited or reconstructed: Griffin's reformation welcomed by his mother, accepted somewhat grumpily by his father, but accepted also by his apparently equally reformed buddies, their racist hatreds demolished by his commitment to the boy (celebration around the child); Portia and Pero's marriage (wedding celebration); Higgins (cured of his 'Bosnia syndrome' in the film's weakest scene, its one descent to the level of the average sitcom) reunited with wife and daughter and setting off with them for a holiday in Hawaii; Dr. Mouldy celebrating with his newly formed, provisional, clearly temporary family, as saviour and benefactor of the Herbigovich couple and their baby. (Another of the film's wonderful throwaway moments: Mouldy presents the couple with a new video recorder so that they can record their child's development; the husband protests that it is too much, the doctor is 'not rich'; Mouldy covers his face with his hands (laughing? crying? both?)—he is feeling very rich indeed). The only one of the four 'celebrations' that Dizdar allows to appear totally free from tensions is the celebration centred on 'Kaos'. The one that clearly contains the most is the upper-class, conservative wedding.

The film ends back in the hospital, with the two original (symbolic) combatants, whose antagonism has recurred throughout the film as a *leitmotif*. Their highly intelligent and placatory nurse (who earlier pointed out to them that they have exactly the same size feet!) has at last involved them in a game of cards, which they appear to be enjoying together. But fights swiftly erupt, and the film concludes on the image of a closed, raised fist. A direct challenge to the spectator: Is *this*, really, what you want?

Do I have any reservations about this movie? The most obvious objection is that it offers no political analysis to speak of: if we go to *Beautiful People* to discover the political reasons why the Bosnian war was fought, or to learn about the rationale (if you can call it that) behind ethnic cleansing, we shall emerge none the wiser. I don't believe such an analysis is withheld from intellectual laziness. To offer it would be to negate the film's fundamental intention, a simple, audacious and passionately commit-

ted political statement that automatically renders the more specific political analysis irrelevant: that no difference, of any kind, whether of politics, of race, of colour, of nationality, or of (by implication) religious belief, ever justifies the killing or persecution of one group of people by another. The film has reminded me of—has *made real*—all the positive and progressive drives that are struggling for full expression within our culture; it has reminded me that the battle—however daunting the odds may appear—is still worth fighting, that tolerance and mutual acceptance and respect are not impossible objectives.

Other reservations are trivial. I find the Higgins narrative less interesting and satisfying than the others (as perhaps my perfunctory treatment of it has suggested). And I wish Dizdar had found a way to extend (if only by implication) the range of 'difference' represented to include sexual diversity (although Griffin, one of the film's ultimately—and almost inadvertently—admirable characters, shows no interest in women, he also shows no interest in sex). But one can't ask a filmmaker (and in his first film, as writer-director!) to do everything at once.

With the TV series *Queer As Folk*, *Beautiful People* represents the finest *topical* achievement in British narrative cinema since about as long as anyone is likely to remember. One hopes that Dizdar, with his stunning originality, energy and sheer nerve, will prove precisely the rejuvenating influence British cinema currently and urgently needs: a cinema locked for the most part in stale repetition and 'Masterpiece Theatre' respectabilities. Aside from the occasional decent 'little movie' (*Billy Elliott*, for instance), the two best British films of the past decade have been adaptations of literary classics (*Sense and Sensibility*, *The Wings of the Dove*), which, while transcending a genre stuffily associated with Merchant/Ivory and the anti-creative chimera of 'fidelity', can scarcely be claimed to break new ground and are scarcely likely to pave the road to a re-energized cinema. *Beautiful People* stands alone, and its neglect is not encouraging.

I would like to end by saying that the writing of this article has given me great pleasure, that I hope I have persuaded people who have not seen the film to check it out, and that I have managed to share my delight in it with those who have.



The Herbgoriches.



Portia and Pero's wedding, flanked by her parents.



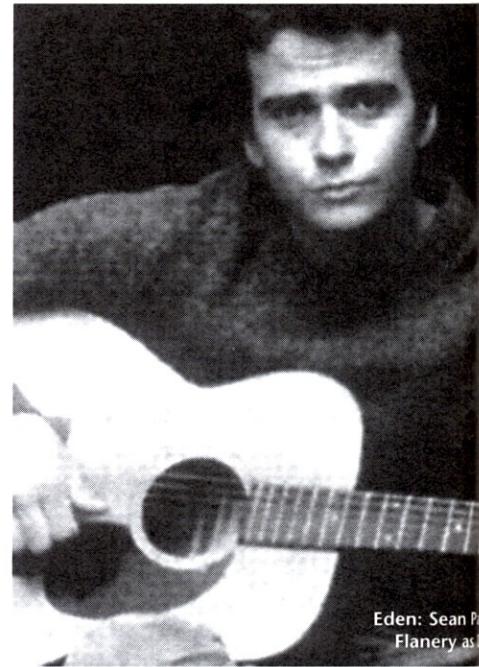
Pero's wedding speech.

Eden and Beyond

by Jason Wilcox

"These films are not examinations of social or political issues except in the most superficial sense; they are about extreme states of consciousness and feeling deprived of satisfactory forms of expression."

—Raymond Carney, *The Films of John Cassavetes* (1994)



Eden: Sean Penn as Helen

Eden is an independent U.S. film which was premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1996, and soon afterwards released on video in the U.S. and the U.K. and subsequently on DVD in the U.S. According to the internet movie database, it remains the only credit of its writer-director, Howard Goldberg. I have not seen any press coverage of the film (although it is bound to have received some in the U.S.), and no one to whom I have mentioned it seems to have heard of it. This is a pity, for I would say that it is a film which shows obvious signs of a guiding intelligence and sensitivity and, although not without flaws, deserves a wider audience.

Since few readers may be familiar with it, I will begin with a plot outline. The film is set in mid-60s America, at an expensive, traditional boys' private boarding school, the Mount Eden Academy. The central character, Helen, is the wife of a hard-working teacher, Bill. They have two young children (having married on graduation), and their house also provides accommodation for some of the students. Helen is afflicted with multiple sclerosis, and walks only with difficulty. One day she starts to have vivid dreams whereby she leaves her body. These out-of-the-body experiences increase, and she welcomes them as a respite from the daily round of domestic chores. She gets close to one of the students living under her roof, who is having problems with Bill's very controlled and authoritarian teaching methods. Helen is glad to encourage him in more creative work, and the two enjoy a mutually beneficial working relationship. It inspires Helen to return to her original ambition of teaching like her husband, but because of domestic responsibilities this seems to be out of the question. Only in her dream world does she approach the freedom she craves. As her desire for sleep increases, everyday tasks are neglected, and her husband does not understand what is happening.

He is pleased that, when she is awake, her illness seems to be in remission, and at a prom dance she can walk unaided, but the change is only temporary. She is like Sleeping Beauty in the fairy-tale, except there is nobody who can wake her up. She sinks into a coma, the doctor saying there is not much chance of recovery. After an angry altercation with Davy (the student), who has fallen in love with Helen, Bill apologises to his sleeping wife for his past mistakes, and acknowledges her need to be free of him. Shortly afterwards, as if by magic, Helen emerges from the coma and seems to make a full recovery. The final shot of the film reveals her teaching a group of students in the grounds of the school.

In terms of genre, *Eden* might best be described as a melodrama, centring as it does on a woman's consciousness and on an extreme condition (an illness in which physical and mental factors are closely connected). There have been variants on this theme in mainstream Hollywood cinema too numerous to mention. In the specific nature of the illness portrayed, *Eden* can perhaps be most closely compared with Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955), in which the main character, Inger, dies and comes back to life again, her temporary death having caused a (temporary) change in values and vision of those around her. Insofar as the theme of death and resurrection introduces magical or mythic undertones, the film might also be worth exploring in the context of the anthropologist Chris Knight's theory of cultural origins (expounded in his book *Blood Relations* and outlined in the essay on *Cat People* in *Cineaction* 52),

especially as the story of Sleeping Beauty is specifically alluded to in the film itself (when Bill tries to explain to the children that their mother is not dead, "just asleep" and the daughter replies: "Like Sleeping Beauty?").

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is the nice tension it maintains between differing levels of interpretation. This tension might baldly be summarized as the tension between the political and the spiritual. It is announced at the very beginning, in which the epigraph from the metaphysical Rilke poem, *The Way In* ("Whoever you are: some evening take a step out of your house, which you know so well. Enormous space is near") is followed by the playing and singing of Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are A Changin'*. Maltin's *TV Guide* comments that the film tries to be a "period piece" as well as a "spiritual odyssey", without showing awareness that the "spiritual" yearning of its protagonist is directly linked to the time in which she is living. In the mid-60s, radical movements and voices were just about to get heard, and were even filtering down into rural backwaters (the Dylan song is being played by students sitting on the grass in the opening scene of the film). The sense of social and political change, with a particular emphasis on male-female relations, is in the air from the beginning. The Dylan song implicitly undercuts the sense of permanence and stability which the sight of the affluent surroundings and Helen's serene opening voice-over introduce, even though the power of this environment is seemingly all-pervasive. The boys playing the song quickly disband on hearing the familiar chiming of the school clock. Their dissatisfaction and rebellion, if it exists at all, would appear to be unconscious. Similarly with Helen. The full meaning of her words requires us to read "between the lines" of her opening voice-over:

Our lives had been so beautiful. Filled with grace and joy...and promise. By my twenty-second birthday I'd already had our two children. Bill and I both grew up at the academies and had known each other since we were children. But it wasn't until college that we fell in love and were married. After graduation we came back to Mount Eden, Bill to teach, I to raise our family. For us, it was like returning home in triumph.

When I was twenty-seven, I left my body for the first time. I was so naive and unprepared, I didn't know such things could happen.

Coming back to these lines after viewing the rest of the film, we read them differently. Although we are never invited to interpret the leaving of her body as a viable discovery of a genuinely alternate world, we do, I think, regard it as the unhealthy expression of a healthy impulse: an unconscious and gradually emerging rebellion against what she has been consciously taught (and inwardly believed) to be happiness. The irony in the lines cannot be separated from sympathy and tenderness. For Helen the fact of having two children by the age of twenty-two is both the fulfilment of promise and the destruction of it, while for Bill the fact of a family in no way hinders the continuation of a career. Although Helen would like to identify herself with her husband ("For us,,,"), she has already pointed out a crucial difference in their lives ("Bill to teach, I to raise our family"). The last paragraph, which appears on first viewing to come totally out of the blue, retrospectively is less surprising, even almost to be expect-

ed. Helen is attempting (unconsciously and individually, of course, 1965 being just before the emergence of the feminist movement) to resist the preordained destiny of a fairy-tale "happy ever after" ending. In order to do this she has to summon the "witch" or "wicked fairy" (autonomous) aspect of her self, which can put a "curse" on her "beautiful princess" (obedient loving wife) aspect. As with Irena in *Cat People*, she is caught in the throes of a conflict between dependence and autonomy. Dependence lies with the husband she loves, autonomy somewhere else. Unlike *Cat People*, in *Eden* there is to be no sense of kinship with animals or other women, although the character of Milly provides us with the information that Helen's situation is by no means unique. Helen ultimately has only herself, so that the out-of-the-body experience is an appropriate metaphor for a woman searching to define, or hold on to, something crucial, perhaps sacred, within her which can find no social expression; indeed, which seems to exist only as a negation of social expression.

Cat People may be classed as a horror film because the repression (through marriage) of its protagonist's autonomy finds outward expression in some other form (the "monster" of the black panther). *Eden* is much more a melodrama because here the repression of autonomy finds no outward expression, monstrous or otherwise. Helen is left to move inwards, away from society, which is ultimately a movement toward death. In this way the film partakes of the classic symptoms of melodrama, as detailed in Peter Brooks' study of the genre, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Perhaps most pertinent here is his concise definition of melodrama as "represent(ing) both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms" (Brooks 1976:16). And a little later: "the melodramatists refuse to allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence" (Brooks 1976: 22). Helen becomes imbued with a sense that significance is all around her, but she cannot grasp that significance nor properly communicate it. According to Chris Knight (drawing on older studies such as Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which emphasises the importance of "collective representations") the sacred can only come into being when a fantasy is shared on a collective level. Females collectively create another reality (the "symbolic domain") through extreme gesture and pantomime, body paint, song and dance, giving a "no" signal to the opposite sex ("wrong sex, wrong species, wrong time"). Melodrama, with its origins in music and pantomime, is particularly close to ritual. With the important difference that ritual is a collective act with collective meaning. In ritual, shared desire and protest culminate in a new symbolic environment (the sacred), which females collectively embody and enact. A single female cannot do it alone. It is because Helen's fantasy is not (yet) shared that a healthy, positive impulse moves in an unhealthy direction (toward death). Symbolically, of course, the females on "sex-strike" in Chris Knight's model are also dead. But it is because Helen cannot possibly create a symbolic domain on her own that the "death" she moves toward is seemingly irreversible (the ending, with its air of unreality, could possibly be read as wish-fulfilment). All she can do is react against her environment by transforming herself within it, turning herself into an object of attention so that the spectator is (perhaps) compelled to reflect upon the social situation and its limitations,

its damaging blockage of creativity and significance. It is implied, however, that the possibility for creating a new shared symbolic domain, re-investing modern life with significance and perhaps supplanting an outworn and inflexible patriarchy, does exist. While her husband and others at the school might feel that Helen is a "special case", it is significant that she does find solidarity with a disaffected student (Davy) and a female friend (Milly) whose creative energies are being similarly blocked and frustrated through a traditional marriage. In her first out-of-the-body experience, Helen does not travel to distant galaxies but only as far as Milly's house. A sense of cosmic consciousness is fused with a very specific social problem:

I suddenly became conscious of everyone in the world, as if I were linked to them. As if their thoughts were mine. And then I dreamed I was at Milly and Lee's and I had flown over there...They had a terrible argument.

Bill's reply reveals that marital arguments are not particularly uncommon between Milly and Lee. And sure enough, when Helen next meets Milly, Milly tells her she has just had a "fight" with her husband over her wanting to do a teaching job ("I don't see why he thinks it's any of his business if I want to work outside the house"). Milly's marital disharmony prefigures Helen's own need to define herself as more than a wife and mother, and to move beyond her husband's sphere of influence.

As for Helen's solidarity with Davy, the film has already introduced this theme when she tries to mediate in the dormitory between Davy's anti-authoritarian, anti-academic attitudes and her pipe-smoking husband's smug condemnation of his laziness and bad grades. Helen tells Bill that Davy is "not like the others":

HELEN: He's not like the others...Davy's a free spirit. You can't stifle that, you have to nurture it.

BILL: This is Mount Eden. We don't nurture free spirits. We prepare boys to lead. If you can't respect authority, can't make the cut, you're out. Survival of the fittest.

(Helen painfully unstraps the iron supports from one of her legs to get into bed).

Helen relates to Davy because she is secretly a free spirit herself, or at least is not so deferential toward the ossified traditions around her with which Bill identifies more completely. In the following scene with the students in chapel, Helen joins in with their rendition of "Silent Night", mocking the actual hymn being sung and proclaiming its irrelevance (and, by implication, the very activity of attending chapel). We then move with her to a scene concerning the dance preparations, in which she complains, not without good humour, "Every year we do the same thing in the same place!"

The other event which takes place during these initial scenes is the "capture" of the wounded bird by the children. The motif of the "wounded bird" is perhaps a weakness in an otherwise subtle film, the comparison between the bird and the similarly "grounded" Helen being a little too obvious and heavy-handed. However, it does provide a potent image when, the next day, Helen breaks off from the vacuuming to look at a picture which one of the children has drawn of the bird flying above the house, yet tethered to it by string. This image provides a succinct

visual equivalent to Helen's dilemma throughout the film: she is caught between two worlds, dependence (marital security) and autonomy (creative/cosmic fulfilment). To choose the first is to suffer from a sense of being stifled, while to choose the second may be to become too liberated, without any sense of anchor or tie. For the bird, once its wing is healed, liberation is unproblematic. It can fly off again back to nature. For humans, liberation cannot be defined in terms of a "return to nature", although it can be in terms of a different relationship with nature. The choice is not one between culture and nature but between culture as it is and a possible alternative culture, one in which freedom and discipline could work together better.

At the outset of the film, Helen appears to be someone trying to mediate between freedom and discipline, appreciating the value of both; while her husband overvalues the latter, and Davy overvalues the former. In her first long conversation with Davy, she criticises his easy dismissal of the system which is supposedly educating him. Instead of merely rejecting it, she pleads that he should use it: "Before you can change the world, you have to understand how it's built". Davy is dubious. Regarding a piece of creative writing he is doing for his English teacher, he tells her he cannot write what he really wants because "the stuff that's really in my head will blow his mind. Maybe yours too". It is at this point that Helen hits upon the motto RIP. Not "Rest in Peace" but "Responsibility—Initiative—Progress". Once again, Helen seems to think that change can come gradually, through evolution, by working within a system rather than from outside it. But there is a nice tension between the meaning of RIP as an acronym (the meaning which Helen consciously assigns to it) and its meaning as a word, with its more violent and destructive connotations (and it is in this second sense—as the word—that she would seem to pronounce it). Davy is full of admiration, voicing what she herself has felt but been too afraid or too unaware to say:

You should be the teacher. You don't just have to stay home with the kids. Go out. Do your own thing. "The times they are a changin'".

In fact, the first lesson begins almost immediately, when Helen has a spare hour before preparing dinner. But it is abruptly ended by Bill's arrival. He resents her "mollycoddling" Davy and criticises her for neglecting the housework. His is an overreaction, caused no doubt by the unconscious fear of the changes that might come if Helen has a life of her own beyond himself and the children. After his angry outburst, he comes across a photo album, and cries as he sees blank pages after the last shot (which must have been taken at least five years previously) of Helen and himself with their new born baby. The moment is a complex one. We can, I think, easily interpret Bill's tears as tears for Helen just as much as (or more than) for himself. At a deep level he too knows that their marriage has denied Helen—and perhaps himself as well—something crucial. The empty pages of the photo album imply that it has led to a closing down rather than an opening up of experience. But the complexity of feeling which this moment reveals in Bill is fleeting, and does not communicate itself to Helen, who we see crying alone in another room.

For Helen, this is the moment which clinches her commit-

ment to out-of-the-body experiences, which she communicates to us in the next scene in a vivid and enthusiastic voice-over:

FREE—what an incredible sensation! How long I'd denied I was even a prisoner. How different, how wonderful this new life was. Every day I would go about my normal routine. I would feed my family, clean the house, but I always knew in the back of my mind that soon I would sleep and then, only then, would I be free. Free to fly. Free to roam the world.
(Slow reverse zoom shot of the house, from close up to long shot; followed by scene in supermarket where Helen's children run around unsupervised as she stares into space).

Sequences such as this provide the film with its greatest intensity, although that does not necessarily mean that the film itself endorses Helen's "other world", much as it understands her need for it. When before she had been encouraging with Davy about his creative writing, when now he hands her a finished essay she first says she is too tired to read it, then, after acquiescing, falls asleep after only a few lines. Social intercourse begins to lose all meaning for her. In an embarrassing scene, she tries to express her feeling of cosmic consciousness in a school open meeting, but is received with blank stares. As before, it may be significant that just prior to this rhapsodic outburst she has been rebuffed by Bill when she suggests she might begin some teaching herself:

HELEN: I want to teach next semester.

BILL: You have enough to do. You have a home and children.

HELEN: I can do both. Milly took that job at Wilson's.

BILL: You're not Milly.

HELEN: What's that supposed to mean?

Helen's difficulties in being understood when she refers to the students at Eden as mere "vehicles" for a higher energy are paralleled by the low mark which Davy receives for his creative writing, where he is awarded a D+. The + is for the writing style, the D is for the grammar and syntax, "all the stuff", he says, "that doesn't matter. I'm interested in the soul of my work". By this stage, it is clear that the film itself makes us aware of the need for both "grammar and syntax" and "soul", as well as the fact that, for its protagonists at least, to connect the two elements would seem to be at best problematic, at worst impossible.

Certainly, as far as Helen is concerned, the balance, always precarious, is now lost. In her all consuming desire to sleep, everyone else, including her children, is an unwelcome distraction. She tells them to go to their rooms because their playing makes too much noise. To them she becomes a sad woman rather than a happy mother (she sees the picture one of the children has drawn of her with an unhappy face), and Helen is sad that they are upset by her behaviour. In other words, even as she seems to have decided to move away from "this world" to another world beyond the here and now, the decision, if irreversible, provides Helen with freedom at a great cost. Similarly, the night before she is admitted to hospital she wants Bill to hold her and make love to her, even as her condition signals that she wants him to be removed from her life. It is worth noting in passing here that *Eden*, like many other film melodramas, fea-

tures a doctor (summoned by her husband), who originally brought Helen into the world. Helen's disturbing and rebellious energies being unable to form themselves into any viable social shape, they are easy prey for patriarchal "normality" to define them as illness or even, perhaps, madness. By going into a progressively permanent sleep, the only sure benefit she gains is that of a holiday from the daily domestic routine, which no doubt counts for something; but by literally giving up speech, she allows her problem to be placed in the hands of those who do not understand it (and who are also the cause of it). Once in hospital, Davy chides her for shirking the responsibilities which she had earlier emphasised were important for him to keep. He kisses her goodbye, provoking the possessive wrath of Bill. Davy responds by criticising Bill's outworn sense of what being a married man entails:

DAVY: This is your fault.

BILL: What?

DAVY: This is 1965. We don't keep our women in shackles anymore.

BILL: What the hell are you talking about?

DAVY: Slavery's illegal and it's out of date.

BILL: You're pressing your luck.

DAVY: You know, you don't even understand her. You know, that's why she has to get away. To me she's the most beautiful woman in the world. To you she's just a cripple.

Here the film re-asserts its central dramatic motif, the tension between stability (the *status quo*) and change (gradual or otherwise). Being at least ten years younger than Bill, Davy is open to the social changes going on around him in the wider world, while for people like Bill, who have set course on a particular career and mode of life, flexibility and openness to change is more difficult. "Never trust anyone over thirty", Davy has said earlier to Helen, who replies that Bill is only twenty-nine. On the verge, in other words, of not being able to learn anything more, but not without a certain margin of hope. The remainder of the film is largely devoted to Bill's own awakening, an awakening that goes on while Helen falls into a coma, with the intention of leaving her body for good. As in Dreyer's *Ordet*, there is a painful irony to be garnered from the fact that the husband only appreciates how much his wife means to him once she is dead. And by realizing this (again, partly through Davy's prompting: "Why can't you let her go?" he asks him), his growth in perception somehow enables Helen to return to "this world". Bill has learnt humility, admitting to Helen that "your tenderness (is) changing me" and also to Davy that his own teaching methods have been wrong ("From now on, we'll learn together").

In her final voice-over, Helen explains that "with his love, Bill gave me the choice...I came back. Back to my family. Back to Eden." The final image is a long shot of her teaching a class in the grounds of the school, rather than inside a classroom where invariably her husband has been seen teaching. This difference would imply that Helen is trying another sort of approach, nurturing free spirits rather than "preparing boys to lead". The outdoor setting also re-emphasises her initial role as a mediator between warring factions, call them discipline and freedom, or tradition and change. The scene is idyllic (or *Eden-ic*), and filmed in long shot, as if it were not quite real. Possibly the film-

maker is letting us know that—in the real world—things are not quite this simple or straightforward, and that what we are watching is only the ending of a film, in which narrative closure is a formal convention.

Despite this slight distancing element, the ending, however, is still obviously a hopeful one (and presumably—this being an independent rather than mainstream Hollywood production—was the director's own choice). Helen has returned from the “other world” back to “this world”. To adopt Peter Brooks' terms, she has returned from the “plane of signification” to the “plane of representation”. To forsake representation for signification (what she had been doing previously), is to cut off all possibility of communication with those around her:

Those who neglect the plane of representation and close themselves in the realm of pure signification are struck dumb. One cannot begin by placing oneself within the domain of full signification and hope also to speak. (Brooks 1976: 125).

Helen recognises this for herself when she realizes that “life is there—in the physical. I have to go back”. We are left to assume that she is able to reconcile, or mediate, the two levels of her experience (“this world/other world” in Chris Knight's terms, “plane of representation/plane of signification”, or “obedience/revolt” in those of Peter Brooks), as is implied in the outdoors setting of her class. Of course, this can only be an act of faith on the audience's part, and the ending suppresses the film's other unruly, disruptive elements such as Milly's teaching aspirations and Davy's yearning to express “the stuff that's really in my head”. Historically, of course, we can agree that since the mid-1960s positive changes in education have taken place, with more of a male-female balance and less of a hierarchical teacher-pupil relationship. But the institutionalized basis of education remains unchanged, and, for the majority of schools at least, academic results are more valued than the nurturing of free spirits. One wonders how long Helen will hold her job, unless she is somehow able to instil in her pupils an equal respect for style/vision and grammar/syntax, whereby the most creative, free spirits also achieve the highest academic results. Such teachers are rare (perhaps always have been), but do exist.

I am sure one of the reasons why *Eden* has not received much (any?) critical attention is because it is an unfashionably metaphoric work, the opposite of post-modern. For post-modernism there is only the plane of representation, while *Eden* suggests—in fact its drama is built upon the suggestion—that things matter, even though it is not, perhaps cannot be, explicit about exactly what those things are. On the other hand, although it contains radical elements, the film cannot be said to be revolutionary either. As Brooks remarks of the melodramatic form, it “cannot figure the birth of a new society—the role of comedy—but only the old society reformed” (Brooks 1976: 205). There are revolutionary elements—Helen's aspirations to have a life of her own, which are also shared by Milly and no doubt other women within this male-dominated system; also Davy's—and no doubt other students'—anger at the academy's unhealthy sense of priorities, its neglect of “the soul”—but these are suppressed, or contained within the film's

composed and silent final sunlit image. Interestingly, there are no adult males in this image. We see only Helen beside a group of students who are sitting on the grass. But as the image fades back from mid shot to long shot we may become aware that the setting, or context, despite appearing completely unsullied by civilization (part of the scene's unreal quality), is (must be) still the old Mount Eden Academy, whose ossified traditions are bound to dominate a little while longer, at least until a new generation assumes its place in the world. Thirty-five years later, these traditions may no longer dominate, but nor have they been swept away. And there has certainly been no consensus as to what could—or should—replace them.

I hope this account of the film has made it plain that Helen's particular “case” cannot be abstracted from her social environment. It would be a mistake, which is a mistake I think Raymond Carney makes in his account of the films of John Cassavetes (another melodramatist), to move interest away from the social ground of the storyline. “Examinations of social and political issues” and “extreme states of consciousness and feeling deprived of satisfactory forms of expression” are not necessarily mutually exclusive terms. The personal problem is also a social problem. And it is no accident that in *Eden* (as in Cassavetes' family-centred films, *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Lovestreams*) the problem is female-based. Even if no solutions are forthcoming, we are left in no doubt that the female protagonists of these films do not live in the best of all possible worlds.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging that the writer-director Howard Goldberg has made something rare in showing his student characters to be interested in other things beside an all-embracing obsession with sex (the mainstay of most Hollywood teen/“coming of age” product). Davy is more afflicted by a crisis of meaning than by a crisis of hormones. Perhaps this is another reason why the film quickly disappeared from view? The central performances are entirely credible and accomplished. There is no resort to crude caricature (unlike most “comparable” Hollywood product). Sean Patrick Flanery as Davy portrays both his anger with a hostile educational system and his growing infatuation/love for Helen with great sensitivity; Dylan Walsh as Bill turns what could have been an unsympathetic part into something more complex, and has several scenes (notably the one with the photo album) in which emotional pain is keenly registered—here we see someone who is also suffering under a system to which he consciously adheres and defers more than any other character; while Joanna Going as Helen is outstanding, totally credible both as a wife/mother and as an educated, intelligent woman with her own needs and desires beyond the domestic sphere. More proof that contemporary mainstream Hollywood shamefully (or shamelessly) wastes much of its female talent, reducing it to the one-dimensional role of marketable decoration. One hopes that Goldberg can continue to make more films. *Eden* is certainly an impressive *debut*.

We were unable to contact the distributor for stills.

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Cold Fever: Atsushi performs the funeral rites (Masatoshi Nagase).

INTERVIEW WITH **Fridrik Thor Fridriksson**

September 12, 2000

by **Robin Wood**

Introduction

In a way, this is another 'crossover' piece, linking two of the themes of this issue: an interview with the director of a film featured in the Toronto Film Festival, who is also the creator of at least two films that have had minimal public exposure but are readily available: *Cold Fever*, Fridriksson's best-known film, has been out on video for some years (regrettably not in the cor-

rect format, but it was never in full 'scope and so doesn't suffer too much—occasional framings now look too tight), and *Devil's Island* can be found on an excellent, correctly formatted DVD. Two earlier films, *Movie Days* (*Biodagar*) and *Children of Nature*, are also nominally available on video, though I have never seen them in a store.

Fridriksson has already built a substantial and impressive body of work. His films are not only immediately engaging, they repay repeated viewing. It would be a great error to think that, because Iceland is a small, sparsely developed country with a relatively small population, films produced there will be mere curiosities, marginal to the interests of those fortunate or unfortunate enough (take your pick) to live in countries closer to the throbbing heart of our much publicized 'globalization'. Fridriksson's is a cinema of the alienated, a cinema of displaced persons, of



Cold Fever: TOP Atsushi with his grandfather (Seijun Suzuki).
CENTRE Atsushi has a problem with a roasted calf's head.
BOTTOM Atsushi snowbound.

people robbed of their identities. And is not this, today, virtually a universal experience? Now that global corporate capitalism has (we are told) triumphed, bringing the possibility of world peace (of which there actually seem fewer concrete signs now than there were before) and robbing human lives of dignity, identity and a sense of value, aren't we all displaced and alienated persons? Watching Fridriksson's films I quickly cease to feel any sense of strangeness, of foreignness: the films rapidly become my friends.

I have always found interviews very difficult to transcribe. The temptation is to turn them into elegant prose, which they never are, eliminating all the hesitations, the struggles to express something one is only just then formulating, and above all the things one wishes one hadn't said (for whatever reason—confusion, uncertainty, a lapse in 'political correctness'...). In this case the difficulty was compounded by language problems (Fridriksson's English is very good, but not entirely fluent, he occasionally searches for words that perhaps don't quite arrive) and by unforeseeable practical problems. We were taken to a bar in the hotel which housed many of the festival participants. It was only 10.30 a.m., and we were told it would be very quiet. True, it was at first deserted. But the bartenders had work to do (with which I hardly had the right to interfere), involving exploding espresso machines (at least they sounded as if they were exploding) and a great deal of clatter and conversation. Later, customers arrived, and their conversation was sometimes appreciably louder than Fridriksson's modestly soft voice. What follows is a compromise. I wanted to preserve something of the actual speech, and (except in cases where I thought the meaning might not be clear) I have left the spoken text alone. On the other hand, the resulting tape is occasionally extremely hard to decipher: I have struggled with it for hours, going over passages again and again. There are moments when I have had to make what I like to believe are intelligent guesses; there are others when I have been forced to admit defeat, and simply omit a few words. But I think what follows constitutes an admirable

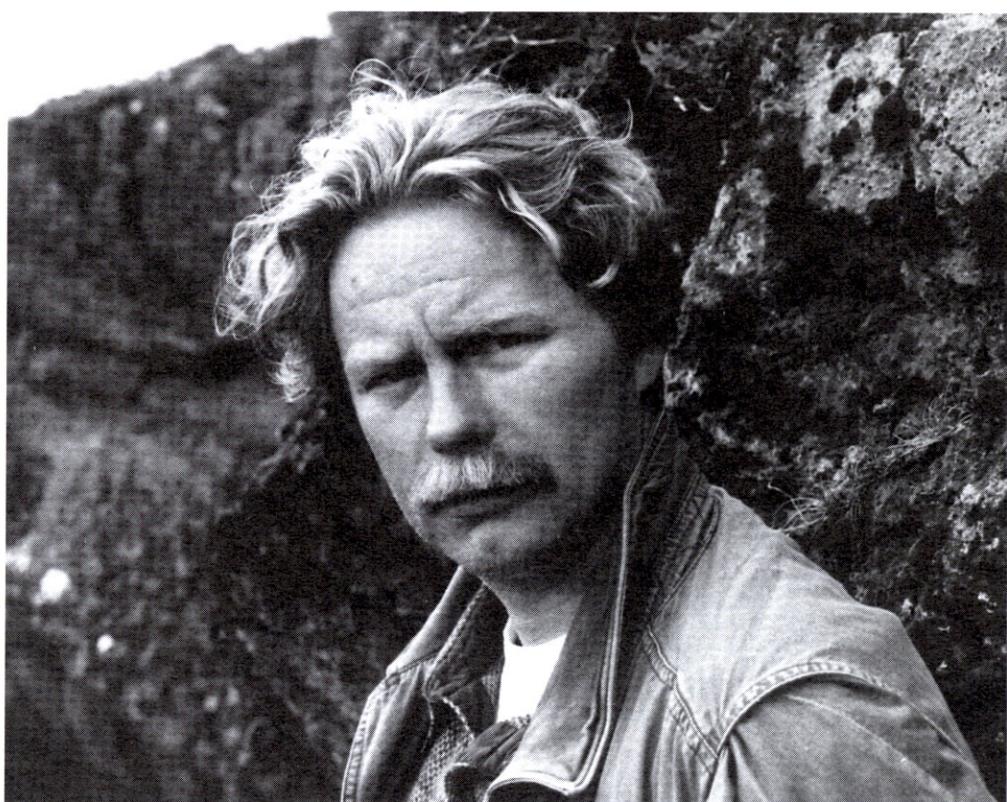
introduction to Fridriksson's work: he is a phenomenally gifted filmmaker, and he is very much aware of what he is doing. He will give you far more insight into his work than I could offer if I wrote an article on it. I think his testimony will persuade readers who are unfamiliar with his films to check them out and watch out for future developments. Above all, I hope that you will eventually have the opportunity to see *Angels of the Universe*, arguably his most important (and certainly his most ambitious) film to date, which, at the time of the interview, still inexplicably, had not been picked up by a distributor.

RW: I wanted to open by saying something I consider important. I've also been interviewed a few times, and sometimes I've experienced a great deal of frustration because the interviewer has asked a number of questions that I have no interest in whatever and expected me to come up with answers, and at the end of the interview I've found that I haven't said what I wanted to say, the questions were wrong. So please control this in any way you want. If you don't like my questions tell me to shut up as rudely as you like, and if you have things that you want to talk about or say, just interrupt and say them. To get us started I do have a few questions.

First, I have not been able to see any of your first two films. I've seen *Cold Fever* twice, *Devil's Island* once, and *Angels of the Universe* once here in the festival...

FTF: Yeah. My first two films were dealing with groups outside the society: whale hunters, who didn't have any whales to hunt any more, and old people... I wanted to go back to roots, in the country. My new film is also about outsiders to the society, so it continues the same theme, the things that outsiders have to do to gain any recognition in the society. Some people take hostages, some people just kill someone, others commit suicide. So it's an endless source of strong stories.

RW: The theme of alienation seems to be a constant concern. In *Cold Fever*, even at the beginning, Atsushi, when he's still in Japan, his own country, is



completely cut off from his roots in indigenous Japanese culture, everything is business, business, business, the film begins with him watching that ridiculous quiz show on television, you then see the streets, the crowds, everybody going to work in the same direction, you then see his work day, finally you see him in the bar with his boss and co-workers and they're still talking about money, money, money, how to make more money. His whole life is cut off from his culture's traditions.

FTF: Yes. It seems that what we have in common with Japanese society is that the old values of our culture's heritage are disappearing, everybody is concentrating on... well, more money, more... what can I say?—on values that are not values for *me*, personally, and they're seeking something that... they don't know what it is, they just know that everybody's going after it. And that's why in Iceland, for example, we have a great cultural heritage, literature especially, and young people in Iceland have only recently begun to appreciate this culture, because they notice that every Icelander has to get recognition from outside the island, from mainland Europe, or mainly America, otherwise you are not serious. I was considered a

very strange filmmaker in Iceland, until I got the Oscar nomination. Then I was suddenly accepted. It was a very traditional way to be recognized in your own country. So I was a little bit like an outsider myself in my own society.

RW: What was the Oscar nomination for?

FTF: *Children of Nature*. In '92, or '91.

RW: Which I haven't seen unfortunately...

FTF: It was about old people running away. But that made a lot of good things for the whole industry.

RW: I don't think these early films are available here, I've never seen them in the stores...

FTF: I think *Movie Days* was available here because that was distributed.

Children of Nature you can also get on video, from Fox-Lorber.

RW: Atsushi in *Cold Fever* seems to find a certain peace, a certain satisfaction, in fulfilling his mission, carrying out the memorial rites for his parents, even though this appears to be ridiculous. He's said at the beginning that he doesn't believe in the rites, that his father didn't believe in them either, but he feels the urge to do this and finally does it, with the help of an elderly



Movie Day

Icelandic character who takes a great interest in this, and who is obviously a very traditional person who really has roots. Is that a correct reading?

FTF: Yes. It could be his guardian angel. He also played the lead, the same actor, in *Children of Nature*. He was a very mysterious person, he could be from another world, he could be a ghost or...something else... I can't explain it, and I usually don't explain, I just... The film was based on a true event, it really took place in Iceland. The story behind the movie was originated from Jim Stark, the producer of *Mystery Train*, he was a guest of my film festival in Reykjavik, and he asked me if I wanted... He saw my first film and liked it, and he asked me if I could come up with an idea for this Japanese actor, Masatoshi Nagase, he wanted to produce it. So it ended up... I saw a small current affair on TV about this family, a friend of mine made it, he'd been in the middle of nowhere and he met this Japanese family. They didn't know how to get to this place that was also in the middle of nowhere, where this accident took place seven years earlier, I think it

was in '84, two scientists drowned, Japanese scientists. So he took them there in his aeroplane, and he was allowed to shoot a small documentary about the ceremony they were going to give to their father. He showed this to me, and I said this would definitely help me along with the film.

Everything I do really is based on something that has happened in reality, something I have seen myself, or I've known the characters I'm dealing with. People think there is all this mystery in my films, and things like that, but it's all very real and very true. And the new film is the best example of that.

RW: Also, the character in *Cold Fever*, at the end, is doing something completely unrelated to his work, or to capitalism, that also sets it apart as a gesture. Aside from the fact that he's recognizing his parents, he's doing something which is his own. It doesn't belong to his boss, it doesn't belong to the company...

FTF: It tries to show how it's possible to change values in life. Many people like the film because of that, they didn't believe in these things before but they had to think about it after it was over.

Because this is one of the most successful films I have made.

RW: But is this going to change his life? I imagine him going back and sinking straight back into the business world.

FTF: No, I think I hope not. (Shared laughter).

RW: It's difficult to see how he can escape from that. But I hope you're right... What is your connection with Jarmusch and his films?

FTF: I just know Jim Stark through... (pause).

RW: *Cold Fever* seems especially like a Jarmusch film in certain ways.

FTF: Yes, actually we were making the same film at the same time. Because *Dead Man* is exactly the same film.

RW: One of the ultimate alienation movies where the central character has no...yes, it's very like *Cold Fever*.

FTF: I was amazed when I saw it. And also it has the same type of ending in a way, although they're very different films. I used to be very close to Wim Wenders in his early films, and I think Jim Jarmusch was also very close to Wim, and to Japanese cinema like Ozu. So my roots as a cinema lover, I like

very much the old Japanese films, like Seijun Suzuki, who plays the grandfather in *Cold Fever*, and he is one of my favourite filmmakers of all time. And Ozu also. I think I was very much influenced by his films. But Jim Jarmusch I don't know personally.

RW: I thought of *Mystery Train* very much when I saw *Cold Fever*, because of the Japanese characters...

FTF: I feel very close to his films. Also the Kaurismaki brothers' films. But they also deal a lot with outsiders. And the human interest in all these films. They have been called the kings of human tragedy. And I a little bit agree with them.

RW: I think in fact the three great centres of filmmaking today are Taiwan, Iran and Northern Europe—Denmark and north, up to and including Iceland. There's so much going on in those three centres. More than anywhere else in the world now, I think.

FTF: And it's all friends, you know. All the people who are doing these films. I co-produced the last von Trier.

RW: Moland is very interesting, the Norwegian director.

FTF: Yes, yes...

RW: Would you like to talk about *Devil's Island*, which is very fresh in my mind as I saw it last night? A most extreme image of cultural dislocation, the Icelanders living in these U.S. army barracks left over from the war.

FTF: Yes. I was brought up with this environment. It was still a little bit related to *Movie Days*, and *Movie Days* is my autobiographical stuff. A film about storytelling. But this influence from the U.S. army was obvious because we received Marshall Aid, and included in the Marshall Aid was that each studio had their own cinema, so we were bombed with American films. And I think it was good in a way because we still have this NATO base, in Tetravik, a little outside where the International Airport is, so we're always aware of this, because we have this NATO base, we have all this influence, and we used to have the only TV stations from the NATO base, and the radio stations broadcasting rock 'n roll. We couldn't have more influence I think. It created some kind of a resistance against this culture, so I think all this literature, all these pieces that were written under

Devil's Island: Baddi before...



...and after the USA.



Angels of the Universe: dinner in the hotel.



this pressure were so great. And I think this is something we're missing after the Cold War ended. Because it created... You had either to be against this NATO base or for it. If you were for it, the only reason was because they were spending a lot of money in Iceland, so it was money again. And I think that I didn't care so much what was wrong or right, because there was the Vietnam war and the NATO base was very, very unpopular, because they used the base also for soldiers coming home from Vietnam, really crazy. Before they were sent home they were sent to relax in Iceland. And I met some of these victims of the war, and it was horrible. So I was always *against* this NATO base. But nothing against Americans, just what it stands for and so on. So everyone had to take a stand at that time. But now my children, they don't care about the NATO base at all here, because now it's just like a radio station. They don't care, they don't think about it. We were always forced to think about it. And I think it's a little bit similar to the Czech republic, because I met, for example, the directors from the Czech New Wave who told me that they made films in the '60s that they were passionate to tell, but they couldn't tell it, they had to

camouflage everything. They had great stories to tell. But now (they told me) we have nothing to say, we have no stories to tell, because we don't have censorship any more. And I think the NATO base, when it was so much in focus, had similar aspects. I haven't done yet the films I want to do about the relationship in modern society between the people in the village, Tetlavi, there were horrible stories we heard from our friends down there, and on both sides you know. The girls were sleeping with American soldiers at the base, the local people looked at them as if they were allowed to rape them, they didn't have any human rights after that. So also rock 'roll came to Iceland...

RW: The Elvis impersonation in *Devil's Island*...

FTF: So I suppose it was necessary that Iceland became part of the universe, otherwise we would still be living in caves. (Laughter).

RW: Baddi, in the film, seems to be modelling himself on Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*.

FTF: I knew this guy, the character. I think it was so difficult for him to go from this society into a foreign society. He lived in America for two years. And when he came back, he never found his

roots again, he disliked everything. And I a little bit understand, because, you know, if you go from countries that are a primitive society to a very modern society, modern America, then there is no way back really, unless you want to be cooling down, or if you're a writer or something. But for a young man who wants to live his life, to have fun... So it really spoiled this man, completely.

RW: That's very well shown in the film.

FTF: And he died on the streets of Reykjavik as a bum, even though he was very handsome. When I was a child I saw this man on the streets, and I always thought, How can it be?—that such a handsome man could be in the gutter.

RW: He's played by Balthasar Kormakur, who's also in *Angels of the Universe*, again playing a pop aficionado, composer of the Beatles' songs (as he thinks), and who has also directed his own film now, *101 Reykjavik*, which I'm going to see tomorrow morning. He's worked with you a lot?

FTF: Yes, two films, and we are good friends. So I helped him on this film in the beginning. So we've been quite close.

RW: Shall we pause while I get you a refill? And myself a refill?.....

FTF: OK. *Angels of the Universe*. This is the film where the alienation theme becomes actually transferred to mental illness, the technical notion of alienation. It seems a very logical progression from your other films. Would you like to talk about insanity as it's defined and the insanity of mainstream culture? The insanity of 'normality'.

FTF: I know, because when I was a teenager I was very fond of R.D. Laing, the Scottish psychiatrist, because he didn't believe that it was possible to cure people in mental institutions. He said that everybody who has a nervous breakdown...and everybody *can* have a nervous breakdown... has to be cured in the same environment in which they get this illness. When I thought about making this film, I... It's based on a book of a very good friend of mine, who also co-wrote the films you haven't seen. This book is about his brother. We have been friends since we were nine years old, me and Einar Mar Gudmundsson, the writer. That's why I knew the character, again. It goes like

this with most of the things, I know what I'm dealing with, and I think no one should make up their own results without knowing something about it, because with this kind of illness, you don't know anything, because you're absolutely innocent. You can have a cancer and they know what it is, the society has sympathy for the victim of cancer. But because they don't know what schizophrenia is, the society reacts in a very strange way, so the only thing we can do is just to lock them inside and keep them until they die. The only improvement is drugs to keep the patient more agreeable so that it will be easier to treat them. I don't have any opinions about this, I just make the film and you form your opinions after seeing it. I don't pretend to be the kind of filmmaker saying This is how it is. Because all kinds of misunderstandings or mis-images we have are from films about schizophrenia. Because many films have, for example... When I think about madness I always think about electric shock, I think that's a horrible thing, and then I have met a man in Iceland who needs electric shock and he says that's the only thing that helps him. He is mentally sick, and he gets one shock every month and he feels very good after it, he says it's the only thing. He tested all these drugs, but that doesn't help him. And he's out, so he gets his electric shock like we put gas in our cars. I would never have believed that if I didn't know the guy very well, because I had always thought this was the worst thing we could imagine that society has done to a human being is giving him an electric shock. So I stepped a little bit outside, to try to see this with a Brecht *verfremdung*... Because the book goes back to his childhood...

RW: There's still a lot of argument going on as to whether schizophrenia is biological or genetic, inherited or caused by experience. The film seems to suggest that, on the one hand, he already behaves differently from other people before the shock of the young woman breaking up with him and refusing to see him again, and that provokes the actual emergence, but the trouble is already there. In fact it's there in the mother's dream, isn't it?—the four horses...

FTF: Yeah, but it's like something that you... Well, I knew the man it's based on and I thought... I never thought he was crazy, because always he had good humour. But of course I never experienced the worst side of his schizophrenia, which happened inside his home, but when I met him on the streets of Reykjavik and he was selling poetry on the streets, he was telling wonderful stories and always in a good mood. I think all the examples we have of, not only schizophrenia but also of other types of mental illness... the small things that cause this, you know, it can be, just a taxi doesn't come when you call a taxi. Very, very obscure things... RW: So the illness is there, but it takes external causes to bring it out, to activate it?

FTF: Yeup.

RW: How do you see the mother's dream, the four horses one of which collapses? She has this dream before the central character is born. Is this to be taken as some kind of premonition...

FTF: No, it is from real life again...

RW: (Nervous laughter). Yes, very disturbing...

FTF: She always thought she would lose one child.

RW: This is the only film I've ever seen, I think, that has three suicides. I haven't seen *The Virgin Suicides*. The most interesting thing is that the so-called 'normal' person commits suicide as well as two of the people the society regards as crazy, and he commits suicide because he's so normal. He's done everything society wants him to do. He's got married, he's got children, he's a dentist, he's doing socially useful work, he's a useful member of society, and he drives his car over a cliff into the sea. So the relationship between normality and insanity is so interesting I think.

FTF: Yes, it's a thin line. Like it says in the book, what you and the child sees is the new emperor's clothes. It can overtake anyone, any time.

RW: Yes, but he's not schizophrenic, he's a 'normal person'. He's driven to suicide by normality.

FTF: Yes. If you come to the end of the road and you don't find anything but small failures...

RW: I think perhaps the most extraordinary scene in the film, which made me

cry in the theatre when I saw it, is the scene in the expensive hotel restaurant where the three men go out to dinner and behave completely normally within the environment. The man who sometimes believes he's Hitler does not believe he's Hitler during that evening, the Beatles' composer does not talk about that, they behave like three...

FTF: ...normal guys...

RW: ...normal guys going out, except of course that they have no money, and order all this extremely expensive food and wine. How exactly do you see that scene, what exactly is its function in the overall...?

FTF: It was a real scene, it really took place, they went to... It was underlining what you said, there's such a thin line between so-called normal and not normal, and if this is normal then abnormality... (At this tantalizing moment the extraneous voices on the tape—bartenders? new customers?—become so loud that Fridrik is drowned out; I have been unable to decipher the remainder of this sentence intelligibly, despite numerous repetitions, and give here all I can make out, perhaps incorrectly. The alternative conversation is clearer, but hardly worth reproducing...). ...has that to decide... and you see, Where is here?... and apart from being normal, who is?... the experts... (Sorry, readers; things quieten down a bit, Fridrik continues:) But to come back to suicide. There were a lot of suicides in Iceland. People don't talk about it very much. But among the young people... Every month, people jumping from a bridge into a river. There are a lot of loose things in our society right now. People are moving from the countryside. You take young people from their roots, they go to school, but they lose something.

RW: They no longer know who they are, they don't have a firm sense of identity... I was very struck in *Angels of the Universe*... and this may be because this is the only one of your films I've seen on the big screen, the other two I've only seen on video or DVD... I was so struck by what seemed to be an even more perfect stylistic control. Every shot seemed so beautifully composed, framed, the editing seemed so precise. I wondered if this had something to do with the content. The crazier the char-

acters are... (sound of protest from FTF; interviewer noticeably flustered)...the more utterly correct, precise, controlled... No, let's say the more *uncontrolled* the characters are, not crazy, uncontrolled, they're beyond their own control, and yet the editing, the framing, the acting is so precise, so controlled, a marvellous sense, I think, of... It's a way of creating a distance for the audience from the...

FTF: From this world, yeah. I thought about this for a long time. I came up with a lot of ideas. I thought of having the camera placement, for example, always *outside* the hospital, always very still. Then I thought about using a hand-held camera, *inside* the hospital, but then I thought that I was coming from a very small environment, very close to Lasse (i.e. Lars von Trier), and everybody would say that I was repeating Lasse...

RW: A Dogme film.

FTF: Yes. So I gave it up. I came to this conclusion.

RW: I think you were right. The hand-held Dogme version would have placed us right in the middle, there would have been no distance, and I love that sense of distance and of control, it's really wonderful. I think it was the first thing that struck me so much about the film... What is your explanation of the fading out of the characters? Not fading out the image, but fading the characters out of the image.

FTF (very hesitant): Yes. Well... It gave me an idea of doing life, it can go away... I'm not explaining exactly what I mean, because I never... I just like this feeling that it gives, that you are just a creature, and you are going... I just wanted to create a little bit of this feeling, not so much. I didn't do it always, just sometimes...

RW: I think I'm right in saying that these fades occur only inside the asylum? (FTF concurs). So it can also give this feeling that these people were disappearing from outside life, the outside world, of being forgotten. The outside world wants to put them in here to forget about them...

FTF: Yes, just like in Shakespeare they say, just like shadows.

RW: Yes, they're reduced to shadows.

FTF: (Dubious about the above?): But, you know, when I use something...when I see it, it creates something that I like, so

I keep it. It can be an accident, it can be... I use all these small accidents or small coincidences.

RW: I was very struck by Stravinsky's remarks. He talks repeatedly about the discoveries that he made by accident, at the piano, and then used in his music. (Enthusiastic agreement). It takes a genius to be able to use an accident.

FTF: It just takes a little bit of courage to use it.

RW: As a writer, often something comes into my head and I think, I can't use *that!* And then I think, Why not? Why can't I use it? Damned if I won't use it. So I do... (By this time the bar is filling up, the noise level is increasing, any serious conversation is becoming more difficult). I seem to have run out of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say to readers of *CineAction* magazine? Have you ever seen *CineAction*? (Clearly he hasn't). I should have brought some copies along. Anyway, we try to be a radical magazine. You know, 'Cine' and 'Action!'—not just 'Lights, camera, action', but 'ACTION!'—the raised fist... (Positive reaction from FTF). Would you tell us about future projects?

FTF: I am also producing, doing the new *Hal Hartley*, in Iceland. Francis Ford Coppola is co-producing. My next film as director is about people who think there is a way out of life by stealing falcons. They steal the birds in Iceland and then they travel to Hamburg to sell them to people from Saudi Arabia, the middle east. It's easy to steal a falcon and sell it there. Or at least they *think* it's easy. It's a big thing now in the world, the Iceland falcon is the most valuable.

RW: Will this be ready for the next Toronto Film Festival?

FTF: No.

RW: The year after. 2002.

FTF: The year after, yes. I'll have another one ready. I have an option on a script by Derek Jarman, called *Neutron*. We have plans to shoot that film in January.

RW: I hadn't associated you with Derek Jarman.

FTF: I like the literacy of his work. This script was written for David Bowie in '81, and I think it was too expensive for him to make the film. But nowadays, with the computer and all these technical designs, it's much easier to make this kind of story.

RW: I shall look forward to both films.

Diversity or Dumb Realism

**SPECULATIONS ON
CANADIAN FILM AND ON
SEA IN THE BLOOD BY
RICHARD FUNG**

by Peter Harcourt

Unquestionably, the challenge of contemporary civilization is the challenge of diversity. Every day, pollutants endemic to industrial development diminish the bio-diversity of the world. The corporate rush towards convergence diminishes local initiatives. In North America, the major automotive manufacturers or the major television companies devise products that all look very much the same. Innovation, market research insists, might trouble sales.

Innovation might also trouble politics. Innovation suggests alternatives and alternatives remind citizens, now called consumers, that political options might also be possible. In the United States, however, because the Green Party couldn't command a sufficient percentage to acquire official party status, Ralph Nader couldn't debate with the Big Two in the recent presidential election. In Canada, although minority voices are more in evidence, both the major political parties, the Liberals and the Alliance, wish to retune the country to be more in harmony with the values of self-interest of the United States. In their own move towards convergence, they wish to diminish diversity.

In the field of culture, more specifically within cinema, this movement towards convergence represses originality. Stylistic conformity is both cause and effect of other social changes within the circulation of film. The substitution of film festivals for the art house circuit works against a sustained knowledge of the potentiality of cinema. During the mammoth festivals at Montreal or Toronto, during ten days that shake the world, viewers have a choice of over 300 films. During the 346 days that follow, within the economically marginalized repertory cinemas, viewers have a choice of perhaps

ten films not from the main stream.

These shifts in both production and circulation during the last thirty years recently led Susan Sontag to lament the death of cinephilia. Sontag recalled the days when cinema was a crucial part of everyday life:

Cinema had apostles. (It was like religion.) Cinema was a crusade. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.

In those days, film style was informed by philosophy. A tracking shot possessed an ethical dimension. The *content* of movies transcended their *subject-matter*.

As art critic John Berger has insisted, content is not the same as subject-matter: "Content is what the artist discovers in his subject." Content is created through the process of discovery — a process that becomes the film's style. Style does not *embellish* a film's meaning: it *enacts* the meaning.

In the early 1960s, there was an exciting diversity within film. The jump-cuts and zip-pans of Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1959) enacted the breathless pace of the film's protagonist; while in Quebec, in ways even more astringent than Godard's, Jean Pierre Lefebvre achieved a different style for every film he made, a different "aesthetic" for every "ethic," as he would explain. In *L'amour blessé* (1975), the extremely minimal style subtends the limitations of the woman's life; while in *Avoir 16 ans* (1979), the rigorous enclosures of its slow zooms and pans reinforce the boy's confinement within the school system.

These were wonderful times, with the cinema informed by innovation. But current filmmakers either reject the formal achievements of the past or, increasingly, are ignorant of them. When in the early 1980s Peter Weir abandoned his Australian career to work in Hollywood, he confessed in *Film Comment* that an individual style is incompatible with an international reputation. Culture complicates commerce. Commerce constricts culture.

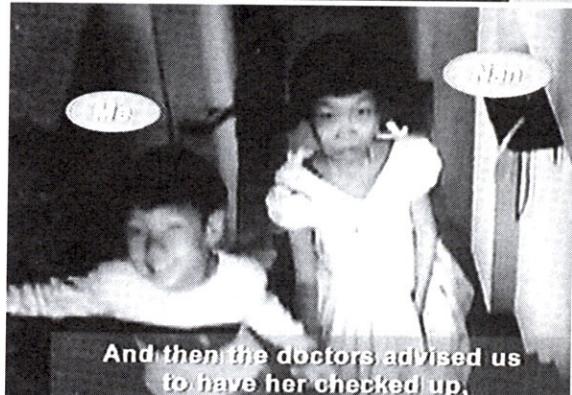
Watching the Canadian films at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, I was nudged into considering

the state of cinema in this country. While there were some stylistic bravura achievements — Denis Arcand's *Stardom*, Robert Lepage's *Possible Worlds*, Denis Villeneuve's *Maelström* — there were other films that really faltered owing to their inability to imagine a style adequate for their subject-matter, an aesthetic adequate for their ethic. Instead, as if nurtured by too much television, they adopted a style that I shall call Dumb Realism - a style that, while supposedly neutral, is actually a style that has nothing to say.

In his rough and grainy *Curtis's Charm* (1995), John L'Ecuyer explored the street world of drugs with a passion greater than many other films of that ilk. The coloured elegance of *Saint Jude*, however, undermines the authenticity of the same kind of world. As wonderful and lively as she was in *New Waterford Girl*, Liane Balaban doesn't for a minute look as if she has lived on the streets. She is thoroughly deodorized. She becomes part of the décor of the film — a décor designed to please because predesigned for television.

More unsettling is the failure of both Lynne Stokewitch's *Suspicious River* and Colleen Murphy's *Desire* to find a style adequate for their concerns. Although both films confront evil, both lack shadow. Lacking shadow, they lack nuance; and without nuance they become either implausible or (at least in part) offensive.

Probing an important theme and boasting splendid performances by Molly Parker as Leila Murray and Callum Keith Rennie as Gary Jensen, *Suspicious River* attempts to meld different periods of time, presenting coterminous lives. Instead of employing the flashback structure of Laura Kasischke's novel, Stokewitch has invented a young girl as observer of the story — a young girl we gradually realize *has been* Leila or *will become* Leila. But lacking any reference to Leila's mother, the film dilutes the determinism through which Leila accepts her fate as a



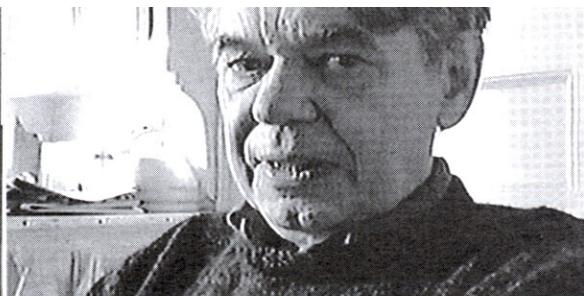
And then the doctors advised us to have her checked up,



I used to sleep with her in one bed, the same back room,



Sea in the Blood, from top of page: Richard in 1977; Richard and Nan; Nan as Angel; Nan, just before her death; Tim and Richard



Camera, by David Cronenberg:
Les Carlson, confessional; Les Carlson, professional.



This Might be Good, by Patricia Rozema:
Sarah Polley; Spectators spectating



Prelude, by Michael Snow: the "sex scene"

female body passively accepting both physical and sexual abuse. The Dumb Realism of the style fails to convey the potential complexity of the film's temporal and psychological ideas.

Perhaps even more serious are the stylistic limitations of Colleen Murphy's *Desire*. As I have suggested elsewhere, her earlier feature, *Shoemaker* (1996), was a film simple on the surface but imbued with a feeling of the absurd — a feeling that gave the film a surrealist dimension. Although *Desire* sets out to explore moral transgressions within the field of love, the Dumb Realism of the style is so lacking in nuance that spectators laugh at its most sensitive moments.

Within the festival as a whole, no doubt there was diversity within films from far away places like Iran or Taiwan; but within the Canadian offerings, the most accomplished stylistic achievements occurred within the "Preludes" and, as every year, within the shorts.

The initiative of Piers Handling, the Director of the Festival, the Preludes were designed to celebrate not only the silver anniversary of the Toronto International Film Festival but also the role that Canadian film has played in festival offerings. Working with digital video for 35mm blow-up and with a budget of less than \$40,000 each (plus many donated services), the Preludes consist of ten 5-minute films from ten Canadian filmmakers. The results are symptomatic of the directors' preoccupations and are frequently extraordinary.

For *Congratulations*, Mike Jones works with his two better-known siblings, Andy and Cathy, to devise a self-parodic story in which the three of these by-now forgotten performers are whisked away by helicopter from their little outport settlement in Newfoundland to become part of a celebration for the Toronto film festival. In *See You In Toronto*, in a continuous take, Jean Pierre Lefebvre presents Marcel Sabourin as Samuel de Champlain. Walking along the ramparts of Quebec city, he rails against the key

historical moments when the Québécois were colonized by the English — moments that include the founding of the National Film Board and the establishment of the Toronto International Film Festival! For *24 FPS*, Jeremy Podeswa pays a tribute to his father and to what the cinema has meant to him in times of stress, creating a space for hope and dreams. And in *Legs Apart*, as if mocking her addiction these days to directing television series, Anne Wheeler devises an *ER*-type drama in which the expectant mother gives birth to a spool of film.

Don McKellar and Atom Egoyan both deal with crowds. In *A Word from the Management*, McKellar talks about the irate patrons that used to bully him when, during his days as theatre coordinator, he had to hold back the mobs from claiming unavailable seats. In *The Line*, with a beautiful simplicity, Egoyan devises a lateral tracking shot that, accompanied by murmurs and mumblings, takes us through the twenty-five years of the festival, displaying all the different program booklets along the way. And for *The Heart of the World*, Guy Maddin packs into five minutes the material for yet another feature-length adulation of the antiquities of silent cinema. This short extravaganza met with such acclaim that Maddin has considered cutting all his features down to a five-minute format — not a bad idea!

Although most of these films would repay extended analysis, there are three I should like to talk about in greater detail: *Prelude*, by Michael Snow; *This Might Be Good*, by Patricia Rozema; and *Camera*, by David Cronenberg.

First of all, Handling is to be congratulated for inviting Michael Snow to be part of this tribute, taking his experimental place alongside Canada's narrative filmmakers. As often in his work, Snow had a bit of fun. Recognizing the essence of narrative filmmaking, Snow has made a film about sex and violence. But with a difference.

Shot with synchronous sound in a continuous take, the camera pans right over a group of Asian film buffs, wolfing down a pizza while getting ready to rush off to see a film. In a way reminiscent of David Rimmer's slipping-synch gag in *Bricolage* (1984), Snow runs his

sound-track backwards. Although a crash is heard at the beginning of the film (the violence!), we see the cause of it at the end; and after declaring that every film should have sex and violence, a young woman exclaims: "So here's the sex part." Only later (or is it earlier?) do we see her tear off her sweater to reveal her breasts. When it was screened at the New York Film Festival, Amy Taubin described *Prelude* as "a conceptual, perceptual brainteaser in which time folds in on itself and sound chases image, or maybe the reverse, as if caught in a revolving door, ad infinitum." A slight film for Michael Snow, *Prelude* nevertheless introduces a teasing playfulness into the assumed illusionist authority of narrative cinema.

Patricia Rozema's *This Might Be Good* has an eerie quality difficult to explain. Initially presenting the artificiality, the rehearsed spontaneity of festival events as we see Sarah Polley, with simulated gratitude, getting ready to introduce her latest role, the film slips into a space of the magical anticipation of a sensuous romance as one by one the spectators become part of another kind of spectacle, moving from the auditorium into the projection booth, as if to be closer to the magic of projecting film. With textured black-&-white cinematography by André Pienaar and powerful virtually silent performances by Polley and Don McKellar, *This Might Be Good* is a haunting presentation of the deceptions and yet the wonder of cinematic art.

Finally, David Cronenberg's *Camera* was a surprise to everyone, perhaps through the universally favorable reception even to Cronenberg himself. Free from the artificiality of special effects, the film draws upon notions of cinematography central to the works of Jean Epstein and Jean Cocteau. The paradox of cinema is that, because actions are always over by the time we see them, it is actually filming death.

Less informed by this theoretical tradition than by a personal dream, Cronenberg establishes death at the centre of his film. "When you record the moment," the aging Les Carlson, explains, "you record the death of the moment," as the camera moves into a Big Close-Up on Carlson's frightened eyes. Even the fully professional 35mm

camera on a dolly that the children found in the street is old, as Carlson complains. He is trapped in the process of being part of the past.

Camera is the most *humane* film that Cronenberg has ever made. It is also perhaps his most thoughtful. In a way that parallels the paradox within Rozema's film, by the end of *Camera*, once the make-up is finished, the lights are set and the children ready to shoot their film, Carlson becomes less confessional and more professional. The fear leaves his face as he assumes the role of the actor he is and has always been. This time with enacted courage, he begins the take for real — that is, for the camera.

Traditionally, short films are the testing ground for stylistic innovation. Learning their craft, young filmmakers try out new ideas. Often these innovations are later abandoned for the sake of commercial acceptance; but sometimes, as in the early films of Truffaut and Godard but also of Rozema and Egoyan, they set the tone for their future work.

Within the Toronto International Film Festival, the programs of Canadian shorts not only allow spectators to see the latest work by experimental filmmakers such as Bruce Elder, Barbara Sternberg, and a host of others, but also allow emerging filmmakers to present their work.

Since the cultural cutbacks brought about by Mike Harris's neo-conservative government in Ontario, however, a new kind of short subject has emerged. These shorts are part of the "Calling Card" program of the Ontario Film Development Corporation, once a vibrant organization, now the training ground *par excellence* for Dumb Realism. Although some of the short subjects produced at the Canadian Film Centre over the years have revealed stylistic innovation — John Greyson's *The Making of Monsters*(1991), Clement Virgo's *Save My Lost Nigga's Soul*(1993), or Colleen Murphy's *The Feeler*(1998) — the films produced under the Calling Card program are (I believe without exception) stylistically banal.

Even Susan Shipton failed to escape these commercial assumptions. Although as editor, Shipton has worked for Patricia Rozema, David Wellington,

Robert Lepage and, most consistently, for Atom Egoyan, her 12-minute *Hindsight* is an undistinguished exercise of little cinematic promise. And yet within the circus that is the Toronto festival, as part of the same program as a number of these Calling Card films, there was *Sea in the Blood*, the latest work by video artist Richard Fung. *Sea in the Blood* is a film that merits attention. I am prepared to argue that it was the most inventive, the most intimate, and the most *accomplished* film in the entire festival — even if it is, in fact, a digital video.

Over the years, Toronto has become a privileged centre for alternative film practice. Many of the filmmakers have studied at Algonquin College. Under the twin influence of Rick Hancox and Jeffrey Paull, they have evolved a way of working with film that is polyphonic in organization and personal in appeal.

Home movies are never far away. The diary form is dominant. Rick Hancox, Mike Hoolboom, Phil Hoffman, Barbara Sternberg and a good many others have worked in this mode. It has, in essence, become a Canadian genre — one far more available to us than the Western or Disaster Movie. It represents a lyrical condensation of the Canadian quest film of the 1970s such as *Goin' Down the Road*(1970) or *Le vieux pays ou Rimbaud est mort*(1977).

An artist of Chinese origin who grew up in Trinidad, Richard Fung has made videos largely for the gay and New Canadian community. He has also made family videos. *The Way to My Father's Village*(1988), *My Mother's Place*(1990) and now *Sea in the Blood*(2000) constitute a trilogy. While all his work displays an admirable sensitivity, *Sea in the Blood* is extraordinary. A video about illness and suffering, it is also about love. A video about death, it is full of joy. It achieves this richness by utilizing his chosen medium in a way that allows him to convey several impressions at the same time.

Like many experimental film- and video-makers, Fung employs a variety of cinematic devices. Video footage, still photographs, home movies, and an educational slide show make up the image track of the work. This in turn is modified by discursive subtitles that intermittently creep left across the

screen, by line animations stylistically reminiscent of children's drawings, by type-written and computer-generated texts, and by translation subtitles lest his mother's Caribbean accent prove unintelligible to North American ears.

The sound track consists largely of Richard's account of his extended holiday abroad in the 1970s with his life-long partner, Tim McCaskell — an account which modulates into the competitive account of the illness of his sister, Nan, who has struggled all her life with the ravages of thalassaemia. These twin narratives are amplified by the voices of his mother, of Tim, of another sister, Arlene, and by a magical sound-scape devised by Phil Strong and Laurel MacDonald — sometimes as gentle as wind-chimes, sometimes through a sequence of plucked triplets more vigorously animated with the kicking energies of life.

The work begins with shots of underwater swimming, of Richard and Tim, diving through one another's legs. The image is full of the intimacy of play except that the "sea" in which we see them is the colour of blood. Thalassaemia literally means Sea in the Blood. His older brother had died of it before Richard was born; and Nan, who is six years his elder, had always been infected by it, always living with the imminence of death.

After the opening underwater sequence, Richard introduces himself as a young man in 1977, at the time when he first met Tim and they began their extended honeymoon around Europe and Asia. A supplementary title crawls along the bottom of the screen offering additional information: "We met at a gay Marxist study group." After another title from Joni Mitchell's "Carey," we witness a slide-show on the nature of thalassaemia.

As a child, Richard lived in the shadow of Nan. They did everything together. "She led all my childhood adventures," he explains. As we view home footage of them as children, Richard appears such a klutz as a kid, perpetually grinning at the camera and failing to build a durable structure in the snow.

While we see Nan sitting at a table eating mangoes, Richard explains: "Nan's eventual death was a fact I was

born into, like mangoes in July or Carnival before Lent." When he explains that as a young boy he imagined angels would appear and carry her off to Heaven, a line drawing of Nan as an angel floats upwards on the screen.

The achievement of this video resides not only in the delicate simplicity of its execution but in the range of emotion that this simplicity contains. While Nan's death is talked about, we see images of her and Richard playing in the sand. Because her birthday falls on the same day as Trinidad achieved independence, the fireworks in the sky become a tribute to Nan.

Richard recounts the moments in his youth when Nan read to him Han Suyin's *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, along with, more furtively because his father despised communism, the Red Book by Mao Tse-tung. And as Richard recounts Nan's recognition that, owing to her disease, she could never lead a normal life, never have a boyfriend, a title creeps across the screen like a whispered confession: "I couldn't tell her I wanted a boyfriend."

There are no photographs of Nan when she was in hospital; and when Richard realizes that Nan is dying, he stops taking pictures. These absences are discretionary, like an averted glance. And as Nan approaches death Richard shares with us the fact that Tim has tested HIV positive. Thus the "blood" that we see them swimming in becomes the infected blood not only of Nan but of Tim as well.

Twenty-three years ago, Richard had resisted returning home to see Nan again before she died. Since her death had always been near at hand, he felt his mother was simply trying to cut short his extended trip with Tim. Although the mother expresses anger, for Richard there are no self-accusations. A title informs us that it took twenty years for him to ask his mother about Nan's death. He has lived with the loss, as he may have to face the loss, after twenty-five years, of his partner Tim.

The video ends with scenes of them diving again in that sea of blood, Greg Woodbury's underwater photography capturing them manoeuvring their way between one another's legs. Then they surface, with broad smiles, into the

sunlight — first Tim and then Richard.

Sea in the Blood is a work full of the pain of suffering but is equally full of the joy of being alive.

Without diversity, civilization will rigidify itself to death — certainly to the death of the spirit. As commercial films become increasingly expensive, true diversity becomes impossible. There are too many risks. We are offered products to consume, not to care for. "Cinephilia has no role in the era of hyperindustrial films," as Susan Sontag has declared:

For cinephilia cannot help, by the very range and eclecticism of its passions, from sponsoring the idea of the film as, first of all, a poetic object; and cannot help from inciting those outside the movie industry, like painters and writers, to want to make films. It is precisely this notion that has been defeated.

Banished from commercial theatres, the idea of film as a poetic object lives on in the work of the experimental tradition. This work represents alternative experiences that embody diversity. Like the remnants of alternative political parties that still argue for the humane values of social democracy, these works speak directly and intimately to individual spectators. They exist to be cherished, not consumed. They move us but also inspire us; and for young filmmakers, they offer the hope that it is still possible with restricted means, especially through the accessible technology of video, to make eloquent statements about life within film.

Down with commercial cinema!
Long live the experimental tradition!
The works of this tradition are the
Monarch butterflies of cultural ecology.
They must be nourished and preserved.

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Above and Beneath

FRANÇOIS OZON'S
SOUS LE SABLE

by Richard Lippe

François Ozon's *Sous le sable* (*Under the Sand*) is a delicate study of the loss of a loved partner through death. Not having seen Ozon's four previous feature films, and given what I have read, *Sous le sable* is a striking departure for the director who has built a reputation as a controversial filmmaker through both his stylistics and choice of subject matter. In contrast, Ozon's new film adheres to the conventions of classical narrative film and deals with characters who can be described as being 'average' people - middle-aged, bourgeois and heterosexual - living 'ordinary' lives.

As a narrative, *Sous le sable* is, in essence, singular and direct. Jean Drillon/Bruno Cremer and his wife,

Marie/ Charlotte Rampling, a long married Parisian couple, travel to their country house to spend a summer holiday. The day following an uneventful arrival and settling in, the two drive to the seaside, anticipating a relaxing time in the sun. Marie, sunning herself, is told by Jean that he is going for a swim. Marie falls asleep and awakens to find that Jean hasn't returned; she begins to search but it becomes evident gradually that he is missing. Although lifeguards and the local authorities participate in looking for Jean, he cannot be found. These events function as an elaborate prologue to the core of the film which concerns Marie's behavioural and emotional reactions to what has happened on the beach.

Like Marie, the viewer is left without an answer to the question of what happened to Jean. When Marie is next seen, she is among friends at an intimate, elegant dinner party; in passing, she mentions Jean's name and goes on, implying that their life together continues the same as ever. Later, when her close friend Amanda/Alexandra Stewart, attempts tactfully to probe Marie regarding her health and state of mind,

Marie's response sidesteps the implications of the remarks. At the evening's close, Marie is offered and accepts a ride home from Vincent/Jacques Nolot, an unattached middle-aged man who, as he leaves her at her apartment building, indicates an interest in seeing her again. Marie is polite but noncommittal. On entering the apartment, Marie calls for Jean and he appears; she greets him and, after inquiring about whether he would like her to make him something to eat, tells him about the evening. It is at this point that Ozon begins to indicate what is happening - refusing to accept Jean's disappearance/death, Marie fantasizes his presence as existing in the apartment. By visualizing Marie's interaction with Jean as an objective experience, Ozon, initially, disorients the viewer and sets up the potential of a narrative centred on Marie's descent into madness as she increasingly loses contact with reality. (Curtis Bernhardt's *Possessed* (1947) and Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) are notables examples of films in which the heroine, because of her unstable mental state, is unable to distinguish between what she imagines and what exists. In both works,

Sous le sable: Jean and Marie at the seaside.





Marie tries to get involved with Vincent.

there are shots which for shock purposes blur the line the film itself has established between subjective and objective reality, having the viewer believe what the heroine sees, in the context of dramatic narrative action, as 'real.') But *Sous le sable* isn't a study of a mental breakdown; instead, Ozon is concerned primarily with Marie's resources and her struggle to deal with the tragedy and loss confronting her.

Sous le sable, as the above suggests, is on one level a character study and the film's success depends significantly on Charlotte Rampling's performance which is beautifully conceived and executed. After establishing Marie's subjective world regarding Jean, the film depicts her performing day to day routines, living her life in a normal manner. These experiences range from clothes shopping where, when buying herself a dress, she decides to buy Jean a shirt and tie, to going to her health club, to conducting a university level class she teaches in

English literature. Just as her decision to not buy the shirt and tie after all indicates an uncertainty on her part as to why she is making the purchase, a telling response at the health club also acknowledges her conflicting impulses about what she is doing: entering the water and about to swim, Marie sees an older man in front of her in the pool who bears a passing resemblance to Jean. She stares at him briefly with a flicker of recognition passing over her face but, then, dons a pair of tinted goggles before submerging herself in the water, the actions functioning as a denial of the disturbance the man's presence has produced.

Although Marie continues to live her life with Jean, she also takes steps, such as agreeing to go out to dinner with Vincent, steps which indicate an awareness on her part of being a woman on her own. Returning home, Marie lies down on the bed and masturbates, and her erotic fantasy, which is depicted, involves Jean's and Vincent's hands ten-

derly caressing her body. Soon after, Marie has sex with Vincent in his apartment, telling him afterward that this is the first time that she has cheated on Jean. These scenes of Marie successfully functioning in the real world occur because she maintains her conviction that Jean still exists. Coming home one evening, Marie finds a message on the answering machine informing her that a body, which may be her husband's, has been found in the waters near the site of his disappearance; she is asked to make an identification. Marie's immediate response is to tell Jean about the message and the misunderstanding regarding his whereabouts but, to her distress, he doesn't appear. Ozon's mise-en-scene foreshadows the disturbance Marie is about to experience by tracking in on her back as she is about to listen to the message. In response to Jean's absence, Marie leaves the apartment and wanders around the streets, watching people; getting hungry, she rejects the thought of

dining at an up-scale restaurant she passes and, instead, is next seen sitting alone and eating amongst a crowd of young people in a MacDonald's. Although the intrusion of the telephone call has shaken Marie, she once again responds by keeping contact with reality.

Marie decides to move out of her apartment and quickly finds what she thinks is an ideal space. Entering an empty bedroom, she looks out the window and discovers the view is that of a cemetery. Her reaction, before collapsing, is to tell the realty agent that her husband wouldn't approve of the apartment. This scene leads to Marie's consulting her doctor for a check up, which leads inadvertently to her discovering that Jean had been under medical treatment. Although she doesn't find out the precise nature of his illness, Marie comes to the realization that he may have been contemplating suicide. Remaining guarded about the information she has and her thoughts, Marie, who has become increasingly desperate to confront the mental and emotional strain she is experiencing, invites Vincent to her apartment for dinner; after spending the night with him, she rejects him on the grounds that he doesn't measure up as a lover. Marie is next seen visiting her mother-in-law, whose existence hasn't been mentioned previously, in a home for the aged. She tells the old woman that she believes Jean committed suicide. The encounter and its aftermath, in which Marie makes an attempt to identify the decomposed body of her dead husband and accept the reality of what she has seen, comprise the rest of the film.

Sous le sable is consistently graceful in its construction and movement, chronicling its protagonist's physical and psychological journey. Beginning with Marie's confrontation with her mother-in-law, the film enters into its most complex, demanding and emotionally charged sequences.

In rejecting her own attempt to induce intimacy with Vincent by bringing him into her apartment, Marie seeks out Jean's mother as a confidante. Marie, instead of finding a sympathetic response, is confronted with scorn and rejection. Jean's mother refuses to accept the notion that her son was ill and would kill himself, particularly to spare Marie possible suffering. She tells Marie

that Jean had been disappointed with her because she couldn't produce children, bored, and has left the marriage. Marie's response to her mother-in-law's brutal treatment is as blunt as it is harsh but it provokes her to face what she has been fearing, the identification of the found body. Marie goes through the painful and horrific process, insisting on viewing the corpse; but, ultimately, she refuses to make a conclusive identification despite the material evidence supplied by the coroner and the opinion of the forensic experts.

Sous le sable ends with Marie returning to the sand on the beach where she last saw Jean. Although allowing herself finally to break down emotionally, she still clings to the possibility that he is alive and in reach - seeing the figure of a man in the far-off distance, she gets up and begins to run along the beach towards what becomes, in a long take, an ever-receding image on the horizon. The film's conclusion is tentative: Marie has begun to acknowledge her grief and pain but, at the same time, there is the suggestion that her feelings of loss and abandonment remain inconsolable.

While *Sous le sable* moves towards and concludes with Marie's breakdown, Ozon hasn't constructed the film so that its dramatic value and impact hinges on this climactic moment. Instead what makes *Sous le sable* a compelling and meaningful experience is Ozon's simultaneously rigorous and sensitive handling of the film's subject-matter which is, basically, human mortality. *Sous le sable*'s visuals are consistently elegant in their composition. The film's images possess a clarity in communicating the director's primary concerns and do so without sacrificing the connections between character and environment and the details of everyday existence. The discipline reflected in these images functions as a counterpoint to the emotional content of the material. Ozon's mise-en-scene can be seen, in a sense, as reflecting the identity of Rampling's Marie, a character who embodies such qualities as intelligence, imagination, discipline and, no less significantly, vulnerability.

It is significant that Ozon refrains from treating Marie in a clinical-like manner, as a specimen to be studied. To have done so would have stripped Marie of her dignity and integrity as a person; it

would also have made viewer identification with the character impossible. Instead, Ozon carefully and lovingly constructs a portrait, providing the viewer with numerous small moments which give insight into Marie, her behaviour and thinking. For instance, through its depiction of Marie's daily routines, the film indicates that she leads an orderly existence in both her personal and professional life. Marie, at one point, tells Vincent she was in training as a swimmer when she met Jean and, during the course of the narrative, her physical and mental self-discipline is evident. As for her imaginative mind, Marie, we discover when seeing her in the classroom, is teaching presently Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, which contains a passage dealing with a man who commits suicide rather than inflict his suffering on his beloved. Marie, discussing her work, mentions the book to Vincent, making reference to this passage; later, she makes use of the idea as a means to account for Jean's death. But perhaps the most telling detail regarding Marie occurs early in the film when, alone in the bathroom on the night of their arrival at the summer house, she stares at her face in the mirror, contemplating the lines the reflected image reveals.

If *Sous le sable* is about Marie being forced, because of her husband's death, to account for twenty-five years of her life as it has been lived, it is also dealing with her confrontation of her own mortality. While Ozon uses a highly specific incident to initiate narrative action, his concerns goes much deeper than a 'what if' scenario. In his entry on the film in the Festival catalogue, programmer Noah Cowan concludes his piece by speculating on how the film may have been shaped by Ozon's own personal losses because of AIDS. As he seems to be suggesting, *Sous le sable*'s emotional effectiveness doesn't depend on the viewer's having experienced precisely the particulars of the narrative's premise. The film's strength lies in its ability to make the viewer feel the complex responses that the fragility of human existence inevitably engenders in each of us.

Sous le sable may disappoint some of Ozon's admirers, appearing to be a too conventional work. While I look forward to seeing the director's previous films, I can't imagine that *Sous le sable* will strike

me in retrospect as a lesser accomplishment. It is a lucid, finely tuned film, which despite its 'serious' subject matter, is never ponderous or self-inflated.

* * *

Charlotte Rampling, who appeared in two other Festival films, Hans Petter Moland's *Aberdeen* (a very good film) and Jonathan Nossiter's *Signs and Wonders*, was present at the public screening of *Sous le sable* I attended and, afterward, held a brief impromptu question/answer session with the audience. In addition to making a very good impression, coming across as an open, direct and friendly person, she made several comments regarding the making of the film that I thought were of interest. She said Ozon told her the basic concept of the film came from an actual experience he had witnessed in his youth - on a seaside holiday with his parents, a woman lost her husband in a manner similar to what occurs in the film. She also said the film was shot in two parts. The opening holiday sequences were filmed while Ozon was still working on the script; after this material was shot, he decided the character of Marie needed more of woman's point of view and began working with three female writers (Emmanuelle Bernheim, Marina De Van, Marica Romano). When the script was completed, the original director of photography was on another project and had to be replaced; hence, the film has two DOP'S (Jeanne Lapoirie, Antoine Heberle). As for her participation, Rampling said the director contacted her, asking if she wanted the role. After she agreed, Ozon sent her drafts of the script, encouraging her to comment on and contribute to the construction of her character.

Sous le sable, like David Hare's *Paris by Night* (1989) proves Charlotte Rampling to be capable, when given the opportunity, of giving an immensely impressive performance. Rampling has a low-keyed but strong screen presence and her performance is characterized by precision, intelligence and sensitivity. She manages to make Marie an accessible character while retaining the woman's private nature and her internal struggle to come to terms with the crisis that has befallen her.

Amos Gitai's *Kippur*

by **Florence Jacobowitz**

In the closing credits of Amos Gitai's *Kippur*, his latest work which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, the director acknowledges Sam Fuller, signaling *Kippur's* affinity with Fuller's war movies. (Fuller's *The Big Red One* was also shot in Israel.) Like Fuller's movies, Gitai's film draws from his personal experience with combat and is similarly less concerned with polemics (in the case of *Kippur*, the enemy is an unseen formidable force, gravely underestimated in terms of their ability) and more a dramatization of the experiential aspects of war—what it feels and looks like, up close.

One experiences the brutal shock of the Yom Kippur War by identifying with two young men, Weinraub/Liron Levo and Russo/Tomer Russo called to serve on Yom Kippur, October 1973. The Yom Kippur war caught Israel by surprise, and this aspect of being unprepared was intensified by an attack carried out on a number of fronts—the borders with Syria and Egypt. The post-war euphoria of the Six Day War (fought in June 1967), a

result of Israel's victory which radically reshaped the map of the state, left the country with a heightened sense of omnipotence and strength. (It is difficult to imagine how Israel, so sensitive and committed to national defense, was ever caught 'off-guard'). The calculation to attack on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, was based on the knowledge that it is a day which many Israeli's—even the non-observant—respect as a day of meditation and introspection. Those not in the synagogue take advantage of the holiday to head for an outing, meaning that it would be all the more difficult to mobilize the country for a call to war.

The film begins with Weinraub walking through completely empty city streets. Liturgical prayers, slowly increasing in volume, inform that it is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Weinraub's presence in the empty streets suggests visually his separation from that world. The protagonists are of an age at the cusp of full adulthood; Weinraub questions social mores and values (he recommends that his friend read Marcuse and attributes his sense of alienation to society's emphasis on consumerism, claiming his second-hand car as a sign of his protest) and at the same time, both young men express a boyish enthusiasm to partake, finally, in actual battle. They are initially excited with the call to serve, pleased to be of the right age and being given the opportunity to put



Kippur: the doctor, Gadassi, Weinraub and Russo

into practice their intense army training (all Israeli youths devote three full years to the army and then are called periodically for reserve duty). The narrative is all about the shock of confronting the wrenching violence of warfare head on. It is unfamiliar and disorienting and those who witness it close up—at its vortex—are catapulted into a world marked by fear, anxiety, loss and trauma. In this sense *Kippur* is a form of descent narrative—where one is forced to confront the underside of civilized society.

The film's setting—the era of the 70s—is introduced in a sequence which frames *Kippur*. Paint colours filmed in extreme close-up run and blend into each other, accompanied by the wail of a lonely saxophone on the film's jazz score. Weinraub and a woman are seen making love on a bed, applying various

paint colours to each other's bodies as they do so. The sequence is repeated when Weinraub returns at the end of the film, and seems abstracted from the narrative. Instead of advancing the narrative or closing it in a realist sense, this sequence acts to set a tone of modernist contemplation, suggesting the idea of art and creativity as a form of self-expression that is contrasted to the tragic violence of war. The rivulets of paint running together in the closing sequence recall the colours of battle—the mud, dust, blood, flesh and khaki tones that merge in the battle scenes. This framing device suggests the film's affinity with the tradition of the European art film, which is reiterated in the film's use of style—longer takes, a combination of a detached camera as well as close, hand-held shots, the use of actual locations and a naturalistic

acting style and a formal narrative structure in which lengthy battle sequences are interspersed with discussions between characters in their off-duty time, where they voice their fears and concerns.

The chaos and surreal aspects of war—the feeling of being plummeted into a disturbing dream—begin almost immediately. The protagonists cannot locate their unit (who have already left their base) as they have been delayed by the traffic jam caused by army units attempting to navigate on two-lane roads clogged by vacationers (the long takes of lateral tracking shots here seem to intentionally recall Godard's *Weekend*, made in 1967). The base is also oddly deserted given the country's state of emergency; a young soldier soon saunters in claiming she was showering. They find one unit led by

Kippur: Amos Gitai directs





an overly enthusiastic commanding officer whom Weinraub immediately distrusts (nearby tanks are marked Damascus Express) and after giving a ride to Klausner/Uri Ran Klausner, a physician whose car has broken down, the two decide to join an Air-Force helicopter rescue unit to which Klausner belongs; their job is to fly to the Syrian battlefield to treat and evacuate the wounded. The group of men—a mechanic, a doctor, a pilot, a soldier, an officer—work as a committed team but the long days of battle, the repetitive missions, the intensity of the injuries, the challenge of treating severely injured men in the most rudimentary conditions combine to erode the men's secure bearings. This theme is introduced in the first foray, where Weinraub and Russo's team evacuate a devastated unit led by the overly enthusiastic officer whom they abandoned earlier, who now appears shat-

tered and traumatized by the death of many of his men. In a later scene, one of the rescue team, Gadassi, starts to fall apart in the midst of the group's unsuccessful attempt to lift a wounded man onto a stretcher in a field of tank ruts filled with deep muddy earth, which makes walking almost impossible. The tone of the scene takes on an absurdist quality as clean bandages and the injured soldier drop into the dirt repeatedly; it is, again, similar to watching a dream where the most intense sensation is that of feeling stuck and immobile. The scene goes on at length, the camera, at a distance, recording the poor visibility resulting from dirt and smoke, the deafening noise of the helicopters and shell fire, the glue-like mud, the insanity of the situation which pushes Gadassi over the edge. Many of the battle/rescue sequences, which make up the bulk of the film, are similarly characterized by

noise, struggle, and the challenge of treating severely wounded men—halting bleeding, intubating injuries, distributing pain killers, lifting burn victims—in the worst conditions. Little is spoken and time feels somehow suspended. To the director's credit these scenes are never boring. Whatever

communication or contact that does emerge is expressed in the evening, between day work at the front. Witnessing human injury and mortality without relent results in the men articulating their primal fears of death, separation anxiety and sudden loss. Klausner, the doctor, tells Russo of this

desire for his mother who died broken-hearted shortly after the Second World War after an enforced separation from her son. The pilot tells Weinraub of his insecurities and ambivalent feelings of continuing the family tradition of being a battlefield pilot. He also worries about a friend, missing in action

and possibly a prisoner of war in the most brutal conditions. Weinraub lies terrified one night and wakes Ruso, telling him of having dreamt of being trapped in a tank and burning to death. Remarkably, the men express their mutual support and care for one another both verbally and through touch in scenes which are subtle and feel very honest. The moments of open tenderness undermine the expectations of the genre, offering glimmers of redemption in the midst of the carnage.

The narrative rupture in the film's structure takes place in the scene towards the end of the film where the unit's helicopter sustain a direct hit while flying over the enemy territory. The scene is remarkable because the camera is inside the helicopter and one experiences directly the jarring shock of the hit; one of the pilots dies immediately, windows are blown out and the remaining pilot manages to crash land the plane on Israeli soil. Suddenly the unit is forced to undergo what they have witnessed from the sidelines—the terrifying chaos of sudden injury, the wait for evacuation, the tallying of the severity of their wounds. When the doctor in the field hospital asks Klausner what he wants, he answers simply, "my mother."

Although the men's loyalty and commitment to their job and country is not questioned, there is mention of some disillusionment with the leadership of the heroes of '67, particularly of Moshe Dayan. The last spoken dialogue of the film has the pilot telling Weinraub of being requisitioned to fly Dayan to the front and suggesting he had better take the bus.

Gitai's *Kippur* imparts a sense of minimalism and understatement which respects the intensity of its subject matter; it reworks the structure of a realist narrative, which builds on exciting events and character development. Instead, *Kippur* is composed of blocks where one witnesses the visceral otherness of battle, the randomness of death and injury which arrives without warning, undermining one's dependence and trust in reason, cause and effect. Creative expression and human communication seem to make up the antidote Gitai recommends.

I'm not entirely convinced that the film's framing device fully works, but Gitai's reinvention of a familiar genre through the prism of the post-war art film succeeds in vivifying the era he recalls and is a welcome respite from the ironic cynicism of much contemporary work.

number of films in a short period of time will attest, this is not the best way to experience a film, nor is a single viewing an adequate way to prepare for an in-depth analysis of a film. There were certainly a number of films that I was very impressed with, but because of their complexity would require multiple viewings for a decent examination; films like Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*, Shinji Aoyama's *Eureka*, Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*. For the purposes of this review, therefore, rather than attempt to focus on one film, I would like to make some observations linking three films that I saw this year: two from Japan, Nagisa Oshima's *Gohatto/Taboo* and Sogo Ishii's *Gojoe*; and one from Taiwan, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

What prompted me to tie these films together was the realization that all three are essentially variations on the 'heroic warrior' genre, a well-respected tradition in both Chinese and Japanese national cinemas. The Japanese version of this genre is the Samurai film or *jidai-geki* (sword play, literally), where historical narratives depict professional warriors-for-hire whose conduct is framed and bound, internally by a strict code of behaviour based on honour, and externally, by loyalty to their master. Akira Kurosawa, the first Japanese director to gain an audience in the West, did so on the strength of his work in this category (*Rashomon* [1950], *Seven Samurai* [1954], *Throne of Blood* [1957] etc.), rather than for his films set in contemporary Japan. The closest American equivalent to the *jidai-geki* has been the classic Western, also set in the pre-modern time/place of the American frontier with its male 'warrior(s)' pitted against wrongdoers. Some interesting crossovers occurred in the 60s with the American remake of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and when Kurosawa's Western-inflected *Yojimbo* (1962) formed the basis of the first Spaghetti western, Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), a film enormously popular in the U.S. The French director Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le samourai* (1967) paved the way for a double modernization of the genre; first by updating the time period to the present, and second, by transforming the protagonist from samurai to hired killer. What differentiated this from a conven-

Asian Fusion

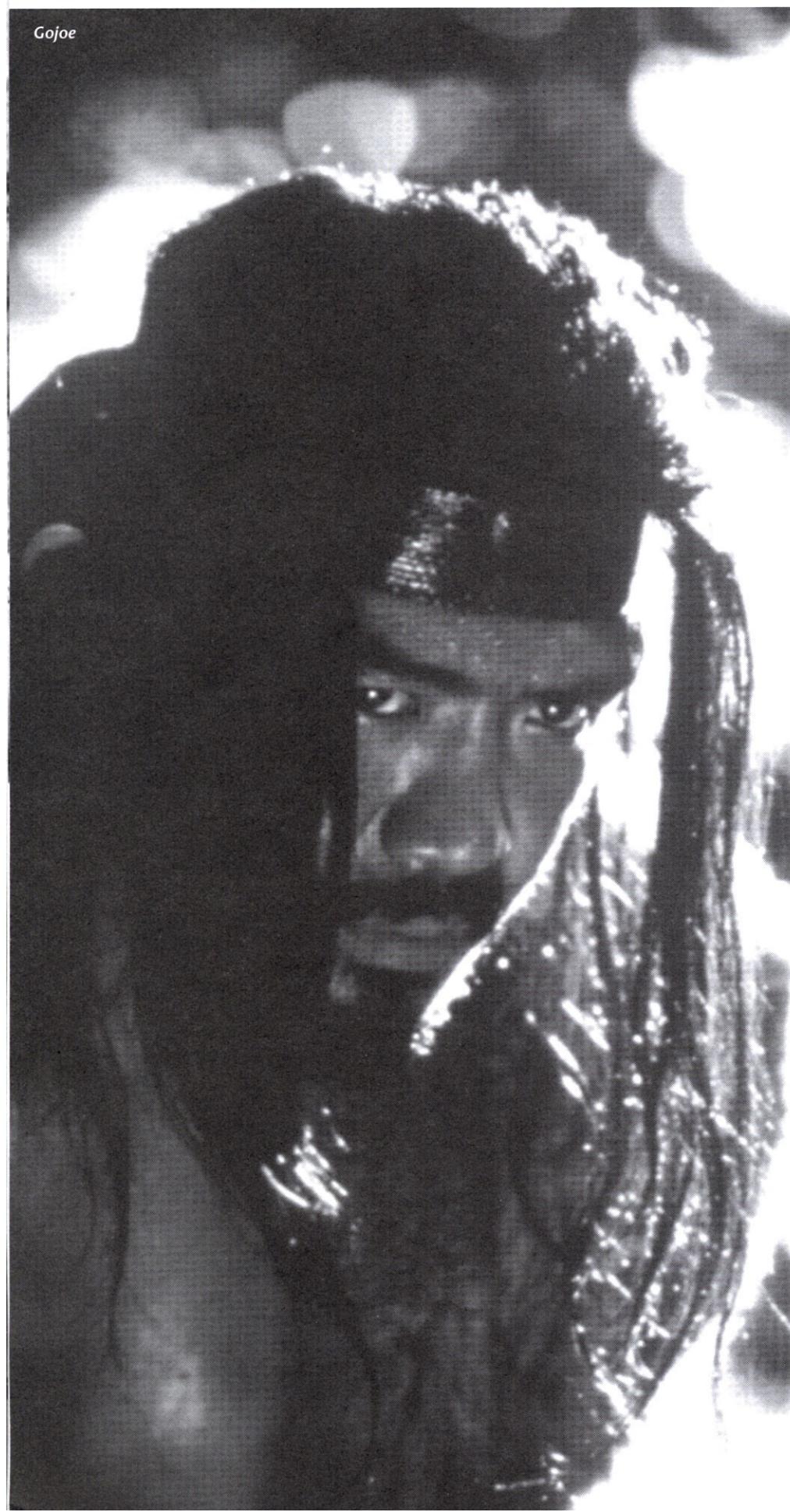
SOME NOTES ON THE HYBRIDIZATION OF THE 'HEROIC WARRIOR' GENRE

by Susan Morrison

With a record 356 films being screened over a 10 day period, the Toronto International Film Festival this anniversary year presented an overwhelming array of delights and possibilities to the faithful who year after year put up with an arcane system of ticket buying in order to get to see films that for the most part would otherwise be unavailable.

Given a limit to the number of films-per-day that this reviewer can see and still remember each plot, in addition to the constraints of a full-time day job, I am required to resort to strategic deliberations and decision-making in order to come out on top. Even after eliminating the films that are certain to open theatrically, there were so many potentially interesting films that I still needed to radically prune my must-see list. For survival purposes alone, it's crucial to have a focus; in my case, a long-time interest in Chinese films and a more recent one in Japanese films. I have found invariably that films from these parts of the world tend to be the most consistently interesting, especially visually, but narratively as well.

As anyone who has seen a large



tional gangster film was that this hired killer, alienated from a world no longer in need of his services, nevertheless maintained a strict sense of honour as a professional. In this way, he became an 'anti-hero' with whom the contemporary audience, more in tune to the complexities of individual moral positions, could nevertheless empathize. The 90s have seen a number of films released that have drawn their inspiration from this transformation; from the simple transposing of *Yojimbo/Fistful of Dollars* to the prohibition-era U.S. in Walter Hill's *Last Man Standing* (1996) to the more complex variations on the theme of Luc Besson's *The Professional* (1994), John Frankenheimer's *Ronin* (1998) and most recently, Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai* (1999).

Historically, the Chinese 'heroic warrior' genre originated in mainland China as *wu xia pian*, or 'chivalrous combat' films. Set in a mythical/historical undifferentiated past, these films combined fantasy with reality, unfolding stories of invincible swordsmen with superhuman powers, demons and other supernatural creatures, and characteristically used wirework to simulate flying and air-born combat sequences. After the relocation of much of the mainland film community to Hong Kong with the Communist takeover, these films which continued to be produced thus came to serve as reminiscences of a national and cultural past both destroyed and denied on the mainland.

Kung fu, or unarmed combat, is a form of the genre unique to Hong Kong and popularized by Bruce Lee and later Jackie Chan and Jet Li. While Jet Li has worked both in period films and modern-day ones, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan worked mainly in contemporary films, using kung fu fighting rather than guns to subdue their enemies. Although the anachronism exists in these modern films when a gun is faster and more deadly than two fists, the popularity of *kung fu* must surely come from the fact that it requires more of a combatant than a big gun and quick draw; to watch Jet Li in action in a film like *Once Upon a Time in China II*, is to see a man fully in control of himself, calm, assured, graceful

and supremely elegant.

North Americans began to become familiar with the *wu xia pian* form by the late 80s and 90s, when the Hong Kong film industry exploded with high energy, fast-paced beautifully shot and choreographed films like Ching Siu-tung's *Chinese Ghost Story I* (1987), *Chinese Ghost Story II* (1990), Tsui Hark's *Dragon Inn* (1992) and *The Green Snake* (1993), Ronnie Yu's *The Bride with White Hair* (1993), Ching Siu-tung's *The Swordsman II* (1992), and *III/The East is Red* (1993). There really is no equivalent in terms of the popularity of the genre in American films the closest perhaps being science fiction films like *Star Wars* or *Terminator 2* which are set in the mythical future rather than the past.

While none of the Hong Kong directors who have worked in Hollywood have made *wu xia pian* films there, they have nevertheless been kept busy directing the Belgian martial arts star Jean-Claude Van Damme's versions of *kung fu*: John Woo's first American film *Hard Target* (1993); Tsui Hark's *Double Team* (1997) and *Knock Off* (1998); Ringo Lam's *Maximum Risk* (1996) and *Replicant* (2001). The genre's influence may be seen in the fighting styles of American films like the Wachowski brothers *The Matrix* (1999), which, although set in a dystopic future replete with advanced weaponry, relied heavily on *kung fu* fighting choreographed by the Hong Kong martial arts director Yuen Woo-ping, who was also responsible for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Jackie Chan and Jet Li have both attempted to cross over into American films: Chan with *Rush Hour* (1999) and *Shanghai Noon* (2000), a recent attempt to marry the Western with the *kung fu* film and perhaps Jackie Chan's most successful attempt yet to enter the American market; Jet Li with *Romeo Must Die* (2000).

Three films screened during this year's film festival in Toronto, *Gohatto*, *Gojoe* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, not only share their category of 'heroic warrior' film, but also feature a well-established director for whom this represents the first foray into the genre.

While Nagisa Oshima's international

Gohatto



reputation has been built on films such as *The Ceremony* (1971) and *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) which are set in modern Japan, *Gohatto/Taboo*, his first film in 14 years, has all the trappings of a Samurai tale, albeit with an unusual twist. It takes place in 1865, at a time when the Shogunate is nearing the end of its control of power, and involves a band of samurai, the Shinsen-gumi, who are committed to protecting the Shogun's military dictatorship. However, most of the film takes place within the confines of the group's compound, and the narrative focuses on relationships of an intimate nature between the men rather than on external enemies. Into this strictly regulated environment comes a very young, very beautiful, highly skilled recruit, Sozaburo Kano/Ryuhei Matsuda, who rapidly becomes the focus of attention/object of affection for fellow recruit Tashiro/Tadanobu Asano, who is somewhat older than Kano but not as adept at swordplay. One of the curiosities of this film is that we are never sure as to the true nature of their relationship. Although all the film's characters assume that they are having an actual physical relationship, the audience is never permitted to see anything but Kano rebuffing Tashiro's sexual advances, while at the same time inexplicably submitting to those of a much older and much less attractive man. Kano is a very odd character in many ways. While masterful in his swordfighting abilities and unflinching in his carrying out of cold-blooded executions, Kano is extremely feminine in appearance, his hair is arranged in a style befitting a present day teen-age girl, cut in short bangs in the front, and caught up in what looks like a ponytail in the back. Like the characters in the film, we are never allowed to see into his motivations: why he behaves the way he does, or what he is thinking or feeling. Another peculiarity (or perversity) of Oshima's is his casting against type of the ultra-macho Takeshi Kitano as Hijikata, one of the most senior members of the group who also is moved by Kano's beauty. It's hard to know what Oshima is doing in *Gohatto*. While none of the samurai are bothered by Kano's obvious homosexuality, in fact, it's (surprisingly for us) not an issue for

them, nevertheless, his (its) introduction into the closed world of the Shinsen-gumi compound would appear to be the direct cause of much tragedy; by the end of the film, three of the main characters have been killed, one... Kano himself...is about to be killed, and the coda that follows informs us that all the rest of the Shinsen-gumi will be dead within a few years. (I have to admit that one could easily take *Gohatto*'s plot as a dire warning against having homosexuals in the military.)

Sogo Ishii, one of the new generation of Japanese directors known for their innovative approaches to filmmaking, brought his latest film, *Gojoe* to the Toronto Film Festival. As with Oshima, this represented Ishii's first effort in the heroic warrior genre. However, his film ventures beyond the traditional samurai/jidai-geki to the outer limits of the Chinese *wu xia pian*. In fact, it could easily be mistaken for one of the more excessive examples of the fantasy version of *wu xia pian* emanating from Hong Kong. I had to keep reminding myself that it was indeed a Japanese film that I was watching and not the latest Tsui Hark or Ching Siu-tung product. All the markers of the Hong Kong cinema were there; breathtakingly beautiful cinematography, powerful soundtrack, amazing special effects, and a narrative so complex, non-linear and unbelievable that the experience of watching it was thoroughly exhausting. As for the visuals, not since the lone biker of the apocalypse was blown up by a grenade in *Raising Arizona* have I seen anything to rival the Gojoe trope of fully armored and helmeted guards having their heads ripped off in sequence by invisible demons, the blood spurting from their headless necks like red bursts of firecracker explosions, framed against a pitch black sky.

In order to survive its effects, one quickly learns to give up following the plot and just watch the action: murderous demons, virtuous monks and devout masters, princes-in-disguise from vanquished clans, enchanted woods, treacherous bridges, and tellingly enough, no women in sight. The absence of women in any major way is perhaps one instance where the film's nationality becomes transparent, as a

Japanese style male-oriented *jidai geki* narrative; the Chinese *wu xia pian* tale characteristically has women characters who equal if not outdo the men as heroic warriors.

Ang Lee is a Taiwanese director whose first three films were comedies of manners set in contemporary Taiwan (*Pushing Hands*, *The Wedding Banquet* [1993], and *Eat Drink Man Woman* [1994]). His next three were American-made, and set in the (Caucasian) past: Jane Austen's early 19th century England (*Sense and Sensibility* [1995]); 1970s New England (*The Ice Storm* [1997]); and back to the middle of the 19th century with the American Civil War tale, *Ride with the Devil* [1999]. With *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, he continues to delve into the past, this time of mainland China, in a film that owes everything to the *wu xia pian*...

Its reception at Cannes and following, in limited release in North America, has been wildly successful, and it promises to be the Chinese breakthrough film for mainstream American audiences. For those unfamiliar with the genre, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* will be an eye-opener, with its exotic natural settings (craggy mountains, red deserts, bamboo forests, etc.), martial arts fight sequences, beautiful actors and costumes and a romantic plot and sub-plot that both end tragically.

For those familiar with the genre, however, I'm afraid that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* will prove unsatisfying. Given the actors involved—especially Chow Yun-fat—and the big budget, Ang Lee has done little more than repeat all the tropes and conventions of the standard *wu xia pian*. The attempt at insertion of a feminist agenda (Wudan not permitting women novices, Jen desiring to be free to choose her own destiny) doesn't work because it's not worked through, and thus appears to be tacked on as some kind of contemporary sop for the female audience. While the mature relationship between Li Mu-bai/Chow Yun-fat and Yu Shu-lien/Michelle Yeoh would appear to form the moral centre of the film, much of its time and energy is spent on Jen/Zhang Zi-yi, a spoiled and selfish beautiful young woman whose errant and arrogant behavior creates problems for

everyone, and whose swan dive at the film's end is hardly a satisfactory finish to the narrative. Too many questions remain unanswered as to the motivation for this final action.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon was especially disappointing in the light of comparison with Wong Kar-wai's idiosyncratic intervention into the genre, the 1994 *Ashes of Time*. Also drawn from a popular novel (The Eagle-Shooting Hero), *Ashes of Time* nevertheless turned the genre on its head, stylistically and narratively. Surely we should have been able to expect a similarly innovative approach from Ang Lee.

In the end, both Ang Lee and Sogo Ishii seem to have selected the heroic warrior genre for its spectacular possibilities (and perhaps its potential mass appeal). What gets jettisoned as a result, however, in both *Gojoe* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is the attempt to do anything other than entertain. Surely we deserve more.

generation, perhaps the most important mainland film of the last few years. *Platform* announces its ambition, most obviously, by its genre – something close to historical epic—and by its length. As it is currently cut, it runs 195 minutes (the French distributor suggested at the TIFF screening that it will be shortened significantly, but Jia demurs).

Like *Xiao Wu*, *Platform* is an unauthorized mainland production; neither the script nor the final print received official permission. It therefore cannot be shown in China, although prints are circulating outside the country. It debuted at the 2000 Venice Film Festival, travelled immediately to Toronto, and is receiving screenings at other international film festivals.

Set between 1979 and 1991, the film attempts to chart the social, economic, and cultural changes that utterly transformed the People's Republic of China during that decade. After the enormous damage wrought by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which finally came to a close in the period following Mao Zedong's death (1976-1979), China under Deng Xiaoping opened itself culturally and economically to the rest of the world. It shed a collectivized economy for a substantially privatized one, and began to offer its citizens, both rural and urban, unprecedented economic and social freedoms.

These are *Platform*'s broad themes. But Jia Zhangke disavows the well-trodden path of self-important history-of-a-nation filmmaking by keeping his film's focus tight, precise, and local. *Platform* concentrates on four performers (all in their twenties) in a provincial performance troupe: Cui Mingliang (Wang Hongwei), accordionist and electric guitar player, his quasi-girlfriend Yin Ruijuan (Zhao Tao) who sings and dances, her best friend, singer Zhong Ping (Yang Tianyi), and Zhong's boyfriend Zhang Jun (Liang Jingdong). The troupe is based in Jia Zhangke's actual hometown, Fenyang, a small town west of Beijing in Shanxi province near the Yellow River. This town also served as the setting for *Xiao Wu*, but in his second film, Jia expands his territory north and west, to the Inner Mongolian desert and the banks of the Yellow River. All of the main characters speak in the local Shanxi dialect, further tying the film to a

quite specific sense of place.

The film's opening scene shows the troupe in 1979. They are still performing a traditional Maoist propaganda play, wherein the performers mime being parts of a steam train as they chug towards Shaoshan (the Chairman's birthplace). But conditions for the troupe quickly, irreversibly change. They are forced to privatize. This has an immediate effect on their repertoire, which now must attract a paying audience. No longer content with songs and dances praising electrification in a remote village, they evolve into the All Star Rock 'n Breakdance Band, "spreading rock 'n roll from Shenzhen to the provinces" (Shenzhen being the mainland city immediately adjacent to Hong Kong). And the troupe's look changes as radically as its music lurches from Mao to pop. They swing through a kaleidoscopic series of '80s pop styles, from disco to breakdance with detours through rock and punk-lite.

Music, in fact, is one of the key motifs that the film uses to trace a social change that occurs at all levels (it is carefully paralleled by changes in hairstyles and clothes). To see how precisely Jia charts music as an index of social change, it is instructive to map out some of the songs heard throughout its more than three hours.

After the first scene's opening propaganda ditties, the film's characters encounter Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng. A soft-pop singer and idol from Taiwan, Teng's sentimental, emotion-saturated ballads caused virtually a revolution in sensibility when they began to be heard on the mainland in the late 1970s. Mingliang, Ruijuan, and their friends first hear Teng crooning on a clandestine broadcast of Taiwanese radio (to which mainland citizens were definitely not supposed to be listening), which they listen to, discreetly, in the privacy of their own homes. In a later scene, they are still listening to Teng, but now in a public space (a barber shop), as she is broadcast on an officially sanctioned mainland radio station. At the end of this series, a calendar with a picture of Teng is visible decorating a wall in a scene set some time later. *Platform* constructs a synecdoche of an entire cycle of pop consumption, from furtive sampling of forbidden sounds with rebel-

Platform

by **Shelly Kraicer**

Mainland director Jia Zhangke caught the Chinese film world's attention with his debut feature *Xiao Wu* (1998). Made independently in China without official permission, hence un-showable there, *Xiao Wu* caused a small sensation as it circulated through the international film festival circuit. It won several prizes and provoked the French film press to dub Jia the most promising young Chinese director.

His second film, *Platform* (Zhantai, 2000), not only confirms that promise: it stakes out a much more substantial claim. It has the weight and ambition of a masterpiece, the defining film of a

lious implications, through mainstream acceptance, to the complete commodification of the musical image harmlessly decorating domestic space.

Jia charts similar changes by means of other songs that carefully mark out various stages of his film. His use of sound is as complex and multi-layered as Robert Altman's: the songs (and much of the film's dialogue) are constantly set against the drone of public address loudspeakers, almost always just audible in the background. The latter evoke the "official" aural culture, first announcing news like the rehabilitation of Cultural Revolution victims and the death of Jiang Qing (Mao's widow and Gang of Four leader), then undergoing a depoliticization and becoming completely mundane (e.g. bus departure announcements).

As Deng Xiaoping's push to open China to outside influences and his stress on a southern, coastal-based economic development coincide to inject Hong Kong culture into the PRC mainstream, pop music from Taiwan on *Platform*'s soundtrack eventually yields to Hong Kong Cantopop (i.e. sung in Cantonese, as opposed to Mandarin Chinese). A scene of awkward social dancing at a disco (to Hong Kong 80s idol George Lam's "Genghis Khan") shows Mingliang and friends beginning to feel their way to experiencing new cultural freedoms, albeit tentatively, in their own bodies. By the mid 80s, the troupe has progressed to the point that they are able to stage elaborately tacky production numbers to the sound of Leslie Cheung's "Monica" (the other dominant Cantopop idol of the 80s). Again, we can see a path outlined that leads from experimenting with the feeling of new freedoms all the way to purveying package-able ready-to-consume culture product, as the troupe spreads the gospel of privatized, commodified mass culture (via HK Cantopop) in its travels through China's northwest provinces. Not all of *Platform*'s musical references are lighthearted ones, though. One can also hear, on the radio in the background towards the end of the film, "Xueran de fengcái" (Bloodstained glory), a song that became the anthem memorializing the June 4, 1989 protest movement.

This complex, carefully organized

film coordinates many layers of storytelling: the story of China's cultural changes, the story of the performance troupe, the story of Mingliang and Ruijuan's relationship, and the stories of various physical journeys that spread out from Fenyang to Inner Mongolia and the Yellow River. Each element is developed in step, interwoven with the others, in a patient, subtle, carefully coordinated way so that the burden of *Platform*'s thematic ambition seems magically light, airy, unforced, almost natural. I would like to skip from *Platform*'s most general themes to look at a few individual stories it contains. Analytically to separate them in this way, though it makes it possible to discuss them, nevertheless does violence to Jia's vision and method. He intertwines the different registers of the film so tightly that each one comments upon, energizes, resonates with or against the others. It is this structural brilliance that is perhaps the film's greatest triumph, and allows it to proceed at what seems like a remarkable relaxed pace through all of its 195 minutes without for one moment feeling slow, or unnaturally extended.

If one wants to read *Platform* as a "normal" historical epic, one could look for a typical romance or a family melodrama at its centre. *Platform* offers both, though they are presented as more or less formal, empty shells, marking out the place of romance and family melodrama, but refusing to fill them with any substance. Mingliang's family barely exists: his mother and father hardly speak, except to curse at each other. They are the shards of a traditional family, who, having lost almost all ability to function, cling to the empty forms of family life until those too dissolve. Compare this with the faith in families as anchors in a troubled time which ground Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (Huozhe, 1994) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* (Lan feng zheng, 1992).

These two films also court melodrama, which *Platform* resolutely shuns. Jia resists melodrama in every possible way. His characters, while remaining relatively opaque, hint at an underlying psychological complexity. *Platform*'s plot is riddled with ellipses, denying its viewers the emotional satisfaction afforded by clearly visible crises, turning points, and

resolutions. The film's tone is, with a few key exceptions, somewhat flat, matter-of-fact, observational: it shows none of melodrama's heightened sense of drama and tension.

Platform makes a more substantial gesture towards romance, though. There is something indefinably moving about Mingliang and Ruijuan's story. They seem to start as a nominal couple, whom everyone (including themselves) assumes to be boyfriend and girlfriend. The film traces their break up and unexpected reunion, but it does so through a series of conversations in which they express little more than misunderstandings, failures to communicate. Two key conversations take place along the town's ancient walls (Mingliang's refuge in times of stress), walls which map the insurmountable barriers that separate these two people. In one striking scene, Jia divides the screen in two, down the middle: on the left side is the wall, and on the right emerges, one at a time, Ruijuan or Mingliang: they aren't even allowed to share the same space, breathe the same air. Although they manage directly to confront their relationship, the film simply drops Ruijuan for a while. Like its many other narrative ellipses, it leaves her absence and subsequent re-appearance largely unexplained, open for the viewer to figure out alone.

Culture seems to be the most visible "character" of the film: it is always on display, foregrounded, and it undergoes an explicit, detailed development in the same way that an actual character would. History is also present, in the background, always implied. Which leaves little room for real characters: *Platform* does not seem that concerned with rich character development. Or perhaps it is making a specific point. The central character, Cui Mingliang, is largely a cipher, played with almost deadpan indifference by Wang Hongwei. We are given few if any moments of privileged access to his thoughts or feelings. Jia Zhangke's shooting style contributes to this distancing effect: his fondness for long takes; sparing use of camera movement; his willingness to hold the camera far from the characters, keeping them in long shot, avoiding close ups. The film's willingness to be resolutely ellipti-

cal, and its camera that stands off, keep us outside the characters' inner lives. In other words, the film takes issue with the very idea that Mingliang and the others have any interiority, any sustained, integrated sense of selfhood.

This is a radical move in the context of the contemporary Chinese epic film. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying a complex account of recent Chinese cinema, I'll attempt to sketch out an account of this context. The Fifth Generation (1982 graduates of the Beijing Film Academy, including Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, the most celebrated Chinese film directors in the West) made their most radical film experiments in the mid 1980s. Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (Huang tudi, 1984) and *King of the Children* (Haizi wang, 1987), in the process of repudiating the socialist realism film aesthetic that had dominated mainland cinema, proposed a radical destabilization of the subject. They demonstrated the impossibility of sustaining the illusion of an integrated individual at the centre of any narrative. In the face of a series of social and cultural shocks that Deng Xiaoping's rapid de-Mao-ization forced Chinese society to absorb in the early 1980s, these filmmakers argued that something significant was lost: the ability to sustain a coherent, whole, consistent sense of personality, a sense of what it meant to be an autonomous subject. The masterworks of the later Fifth Generation, however, turned to historical epic and away from this deconstruction of the subject. In *Farewell My Concubine* (Bawang bie ji, 1993), *To Live*, and *Blue Kite*, a unified historical subject is again taken for granted. These films turn their attention to a re-interpretation of history, as experienced by this non-problematic subject. The independent mainland filmmakers who followed the Fifth Generation in graduating from the Beijing Film Academy, called for convenience the Sixth Generation (including Wang Xiaoshuai, He Jianjun, and



Platform

Zhang Yuan), refocused their gaze towards urban, contemporary society. Their interest is in exploring the interplay between urban society and its citizens. The city dwellers in their films tend to experience feelings of contemporaneity and dislocation in an alienating urban environment which variously frustrate and deform their sense of autonomy and integrity. In a sense, by shunning the larger questions of Chinese history, these younger filmmakers re-open the questions surrounding the destabilized subject that had been left hanging in the mid 80s. Jia's giant step is to reintroduce history to Sixth Generation filmmaking, to reinstate the question marks around the possibility of the integrated subject in the context of historical (epic) cinema. Through *Platform*, Jia Zhangke re-situates the unresolved issues around the deconstructed subject within his own generation's experience. At the same time, it displaces its subjects from what Rey Chow has called the Fifth Generation's "ethnographic" rural gaze and drops them firmly into that situation of contemporary urbanity which also preoccupies the contemporary cinemas of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Platform manages to evoke what it might have been like to grow up in 1980s China without ever resolving an acute ambivalence that it discovers there. To revisit one last time the film's music, *Platform*'s title (*Zhantai*, in Chinese) comes from a song popular in the mainland in the '80s, whose text contains the following:

A long and empty platform
My short-lived love
Lonely, we cannot wait,
All my love is outbound,
Nothing on the inbound train,
My heart waits forever.

While we hear the song, we see one of *Platform*'s most remarkable and least narratively motivated scenes. Captured in extreme long shot against a desert landscape, the troupe's blue truck appears to have broken down. A train is heard and finally seen approaching. Mingliang and colleagues run up to the tracks, wave excitedly at the train as it approaches and its sound increases, temporarily drowning out the song. It

roars by, though, leaving them alone and abandoned in a desolate landscape, with no apparent method of continuing their voyage. All of the characters in *Platform* have internalized the lyric's sense of yearning, of expectation for change, for movement, for escape from the stagnant past in which they have been mired towards a future full of possibility, overflowing with promise. But they can't realize that promise, and don't know how to reach that future. Despite their attempts to get with the movement of history, with the constant motion and change that they feel around them, they seem to "miss the train", waiting forever for a movement that they can't catch. You can see this expressed in many of the film's threads: the constant circling voyages of the troupe, who head out of Fenyang's ancient gates each time, only to return to a town that they don't seem to be able definitively to escape from. They move in circles, describing efforts to evolve, to join a broader world, only to find that they inevitably return home, only to repeat the process once more.

Mingliang's own story also mirrors this sense of frustrated movement. Despite all his experience, he winds up domesticated, at home, in a surprisingly sedate family setting. The film's penultimate scene shows him dozing in an apartment, with a wife and child. Just visible, outside, are Fenyang's walls which, though porous (signalled by the repeating motif of the gate, passages through which clearly mark *Platform*'s various stages), manage to assert themselves at the end, constraining in some irresistible way Fenyang's inhabitants, *Platform*'s characters. It is not at all surprising that this arc of frustrated possibility—of yearning compromised by stasis—should be felt underpinning a film that starts with the end of Maoism, celebrates a decade full of more promise and freedom than perhaps any that China has experienced in its modern history, and ends with the post-1989 period of retrenchment and disillusionment.

Jia's explorations of character are inflected in an interesting way, by gender. He grants each of his two main female characters a scene with an air of transcendence about it, something completely inaccessible to Mingliang or his

male friends. Both Zhong Ping and Yin Ruijuan have extended sequences in which they dance. Zhong Ping's is a red flare of flamenco energy, following her bold decision to have her hair permed. And Ruijuan, just before she leaves the troupe (and the narrative, temporarily), is given a long, single sequence shot that evokes poetry. Wearing a yellow sweater, she reads a letter while listening to a romantic song of departure on the radio, and slowly begins to sway. As the song escalates in volume and passion, so do Ruijuan's movements, until she is dancing expressively, with classically based steps, filling the room and the screen with a passion and freedom that the film hasn't yet allowed itself to show. Jia has described these two scenes as the most difficult and moving for him to film, during the making of *Platform*. They are his gift to the audience, two privileged moments of rhapsodic interiority, of embodied freedom-in-movement. Although they are ultimately contained by *Platform*'s narrative, they remain islands of possibility, glimpses of a release from stasis. So, instead, it leaves an ambivalent gesture of tentative closure (an anonymous rifleman shoots in the air), a salute to its characters that refuses to abandon them. We are left with traces of a longing for a different kind of story and a different history, one that could escape beyond these isolated moments that the film both protects and offers to us.

Juan Carlos Tabío, Cuban Cinema and *The Waiting List*

by Scott Forsyth

The Cuban director, Juan Carlos Tabío, is justly celebrated for his comic satires, like *Plaff*, of Cuban daily life and its



human and bureaucratic follies, as well as for several memorable collaborations, including *Strawberry and Chocolate*, with the great Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. His films often feature a sophisticated play with narrative conventions and expectations and always, despite their comic, even slapstick, style, offer a thoughtful consideration of serious themes.

I spoke with Tabío after his latest film, *The Waiting List* (*Lista de espera*) premiered in North America at the Festival in Toronto in September, 2000. The interview was helpfully arranged by Augusta Dwyer, of the Festival's Press Office, who also ably translated our conversation.

The Waiting List is an often hilarious tale of a group of passengers waiting for a bus that never comes. The characters offer a cross-section of Cuban types facing the frustrations of everyday life — shortages, bureaucratic confusion and indifference, the constant need to cope and improvise. After interminable delays, the passengers decide to take on the situation themselves. They try to fix

a broken bus and begin to transform the station itself. Romances bloom, secret desires and ambitions are revealed, the selfish interests of the few give way to the collective spirit of the many. The decrepit bus station becomes idyllic, too beautiful for the characters to leave. The film subtly takes us into a dream, a collective dream, of transformation and imagination. When reality, of course, asserts itself with a shock, the characters and that reality are not quite the same as they were. The film frankly confronts what it is to be Cuban and daily try to answer the question, as one character puts it, "Is this a socialist country or a capitalist country that we have here?" But it also aspires to a universal address, in the spirit of Buñuel, whose narrative conundrums are amusingly evoked by several characters, where we are teased and provoked by the fragile but powerful relationships between humanity's real and imaginary constructions.

Tabío is an eloquent and confident

man. He is pleased that this film has already opened with great success in Spain, is scheduled for release throughout Latin America and has played to appreciative audiences in Cuba, despite a limited number of prints in distribution there. We began by discussing the state of Cuban cinema, since the Special Period of crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union. "Cuban cinema was in a total crisis, for three years, not a single film was made." But he noted that all Latin American filmmakers have also faced great difficulties. There has been improvement in this situation; there are three films in post-production and one filming in Havana right now. He predicted that in a few years, Cuba may be making 10 or 12 films a year, more than before the crisis. Part of the solution has been the development of co-productions which provide needed financing and, crucially, allow distribution around the world. This new film is a co-production between ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute, and Spanish,

Mexican and German producers. Although co-productions are often seen as a dominating process of cultural globalization, Tabío insisted that "I am making the films I want, that this is an authentic Cuban cultural product." He says that his producers "have a lot of respect for creation, nothing is ever imposed and the film is the results of a dialogue". He does concede that not all producers are the same and there is still "a crisis for cinema all over the world" brought on by video, television and powerful economic forces.

The Waiting List is dedicated to "Titon", a nickname for Alea, the most famed of Cuban filmmakers, and Tabío spoke eloquently of his very good friend and collaborator: "The legacy of Alea is a way of looking at reality as a form of collective consciousness; the idea of the artist to give back an image of reality that is the most complex and provocative possible." For Tabío, this means dealing with ideas but more: "the artist works with obsessions – the process is sub-conscious, so if there is something consistent (in his work), it is looking at Cuban reality at one time but trying to touch a universal nerve, the necessity of risks to improve your life, the need to run toward the imagination and try to improve things."

I asked Tabío if the film could be seen as a national allegory, the critical approach taken to many works of art from the so-called Third World. He said that was true but that he preferred to think of the film as a fable, like a child's tale. That fable is about "the necessity of adopting unthinkable solutions, the need

to break norms to reach that solution, the importance of human solidarity and collective answers." He felt it was obvious that we can see the film as portraying its characters as Cuba beset by hostile forces in a neo-liberal world order, with obvious pressures on Cuban socialism. But he is more interested in his characters who "are all rivals, faced with a problem, with everybody trying to get ahead, but with the need to replenish a collective solution – it is a new world that they have created through their combined efforts – that says it all, that is the essence." At the end, "we see it is a dream, but these people try to carry that dream out, despite millions of obstacles and struggles to achieve this, they are ready to take that on." The characters awake in *The Waiting List* but they can say that they know "we can build a better world with our own hands." The hours spent dreaming, which the film seems to portray as months, are "worth a whole lifetime."

The process of film production tries to mirror this collective commitment and Tabío commented favourably on working with actors, like Vladimir Cruz and Jorge Perugorria, both from *Strawberry and Chocolate*. The film is "a collective creation, profoundly, we sit at a table, and talk to all the actors, get under the layers of characters, discuss the large objectives and ideas of the film; there is no contradiction between actor and director, it is a synthesis." This can certainly be felt in the ensemble work of the large cast, each character sharply etched, but capable of some significant growth or change, each

understood for their particular motives, even if our sympathies are also critical.

As usual in Cuban films, bureaucracy comes in for many digs. One obnoxious man keeps threatening to call the authorities on "the undisciplined mob" who are collectively imagining a different reality. Of course, Tabío is on the side of the undisciplined mob and these calls for order and discipline go unheard; the stolid bureaucrat and his poor family get a comic comeuppance. Cuban cinema is famed for its criticism of the revolution, within the revolution, and I asked Tabío if he could comment on the filmmakers' way of dealing with such problems of bureaucracy and democracy. Tabío recalled the crucial historical role of filmmakers in Cuban revolutionary culture: "Cuban filmmakers for many years back built a space for critical, reflexive, provocative self-criticism, (films) which move people toward reflection." ICAIC – its filmmakers and its leaders – have developed "a culture of cinema, a vision of filmmakers, where there is a dialogue that is not always a dream but allows Cuban films to question."

The Waiting List works within this distinguished tradition of Cuban film-making. It offers a clear, critical registration of reality but challenges the imaginations of its characters and its audience. It cleverly plays with cinematic convention in a popular and accessible way. Without didacticism, it makes the possibility of collective engagement, and different futures than those offered by politically and economically circumscribed reality, entertaining and tangible.

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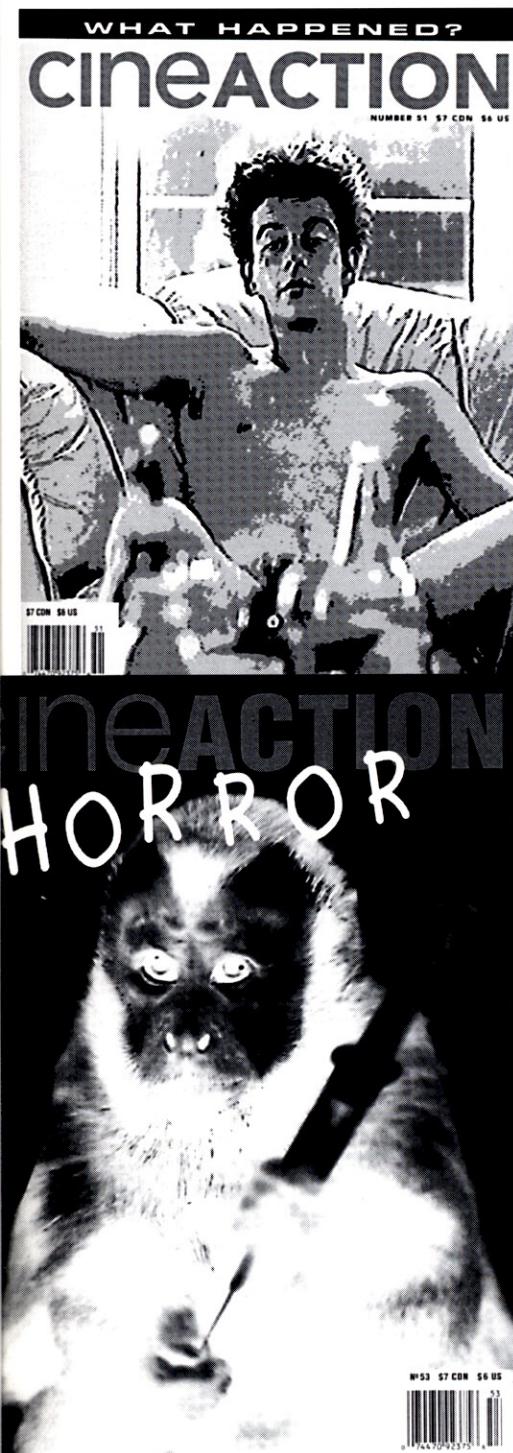
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